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MARCH 13, 1943

WILD WEST

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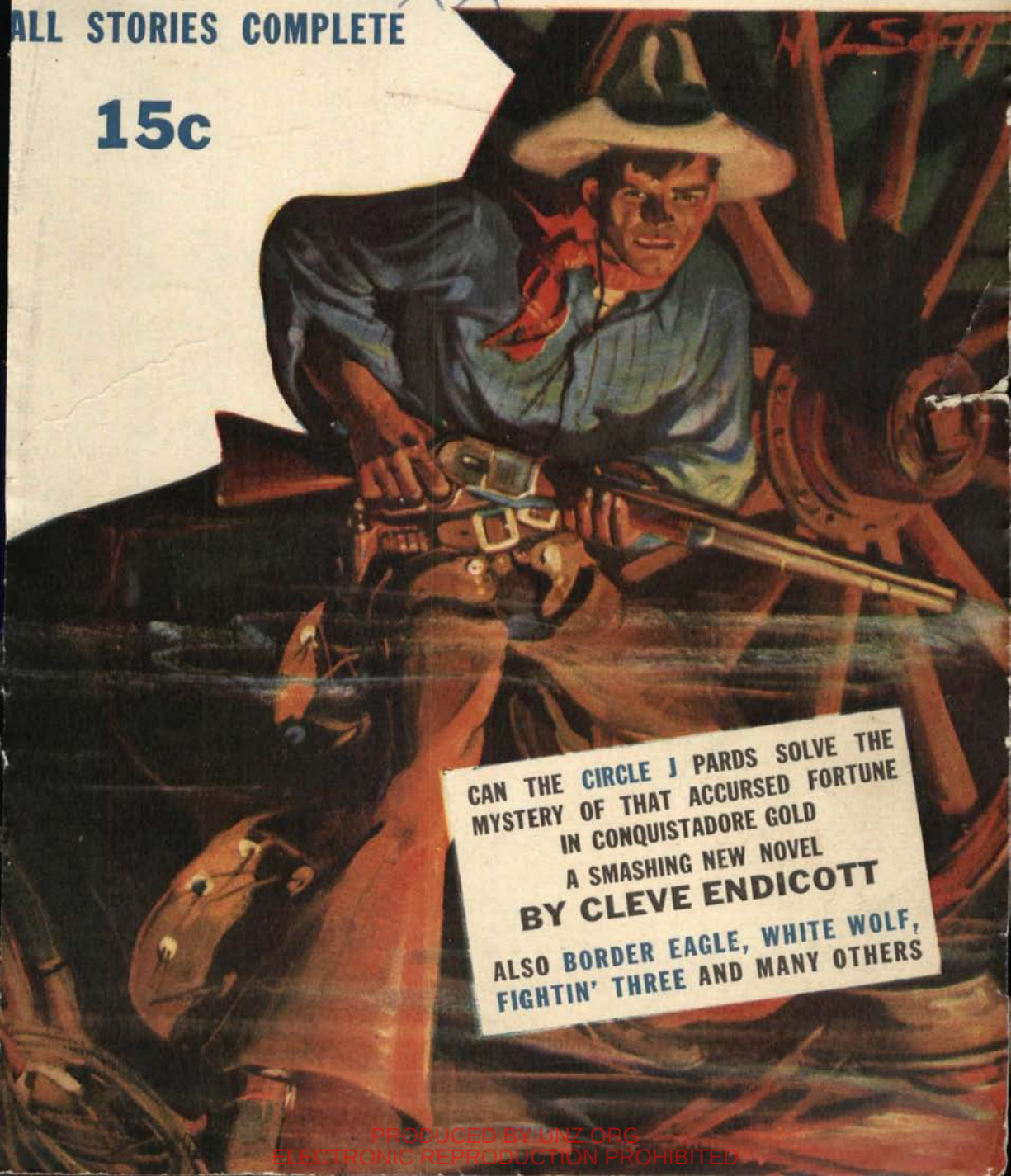

CAN THE CIRCLE J PARDS SOLVE THE MYSTERY OF THAT ACCURSED FORTUNE IN CONQUISTADORE GOLD

A SMASHING NEW NOVEL

BY CLEVE ENDICOTT

ALSO BORDER EAGLE, WHITE WOLF, FIGHTIN' THREE AND MANY OTHERS

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STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

FOUNDED 1902

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TWO BIG NOVELS WITH YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTERS

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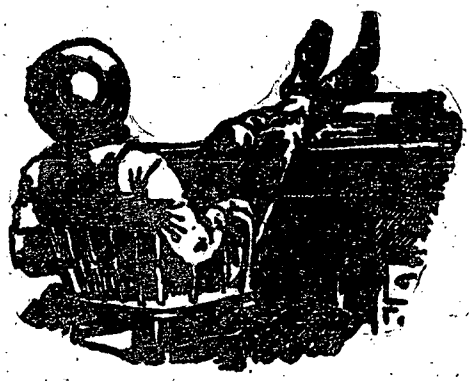

A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

THIS is a mighty fat issue of what we hope is yore favorite magazine. As you'll notice, it contains a flock of favorite characters along with stories by other top-hand writers—full money's worth, same as in the past. For the benefit of those readers who didn't see the announcement in the previous issue, our new policy of publishing Wild West every other week is to help Uncle Sam's war effort. Shipping space is very valuable now for all the various weapons and supplies used by our fighting forces. Their needs quite properly come first, and we're glad to do our part toward giving them more of that shipping space—so we're turning over nearly half of what was used by Wild West when it was a weekly.

We know that you're all doing your part, too, no matter what your occupation. And we know that you're not squawking or complaining about hard work or any form of rationing. Whatever our imagined hardships, they aren't near so tough as those of our fighting men who are plowing through toward victory on most of the world's battlefronts.

Which reminds me I have a note from one of yore favorite writin' gents, who's now wearing khaki to protect you the same as his fictional Tommy Rockford has done for Americans in the pages of this magazine.

HI, BOSS: I'm in the medical corps at one of America's finest camps. Eleven weeks of basic training and then I'll be assigned permanently to a fighting unit. I hope to be able to do a little writing in my off hours, as we "medicos" don't have it quite so arduous as the infantry or the engineers (for example) do. If Uncle Sam dabs his loop on any of you, I hope you land in the medical corps. It's a fine outfit and I'm lucky to be in it. I'm working hard as h---, but enjoying it.

Best regards,
WALKER (TWO-GUN) TOMPKINS.

Waal, Tompk, mighty glad to hear from you. Are yore present guns gold-plated, like those of Tommy Rockford? Keep yore trigger finger healthy!

THE RANGE BOSS.

Our next big issue, which will be dated March 27th, presents another prime 160 pages loaded with the best Western fiction and features to be had. There'll be five smashing novelettes!

"Blind Trails," by Emery Jackson, stars that salty range detective, the Whistlin' Kid. The cold-eyed master gunman, Rowdy Lang, chills his way through "Owlhoot Brand," by James P. Webb. "Hell's Highgraders," by Ed Earl Repp, shows Yuma Bill's talents to best advantage. "Frying-pan Legacy," by R. S. Lerch, is an unusual yarn. And the same can be said for the fifth novelette—"A Rebel Takes His Gun," by Wayne D. Overholser.

And a flock of fine short stories, too!

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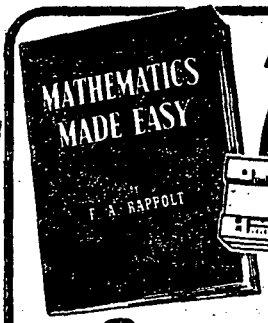

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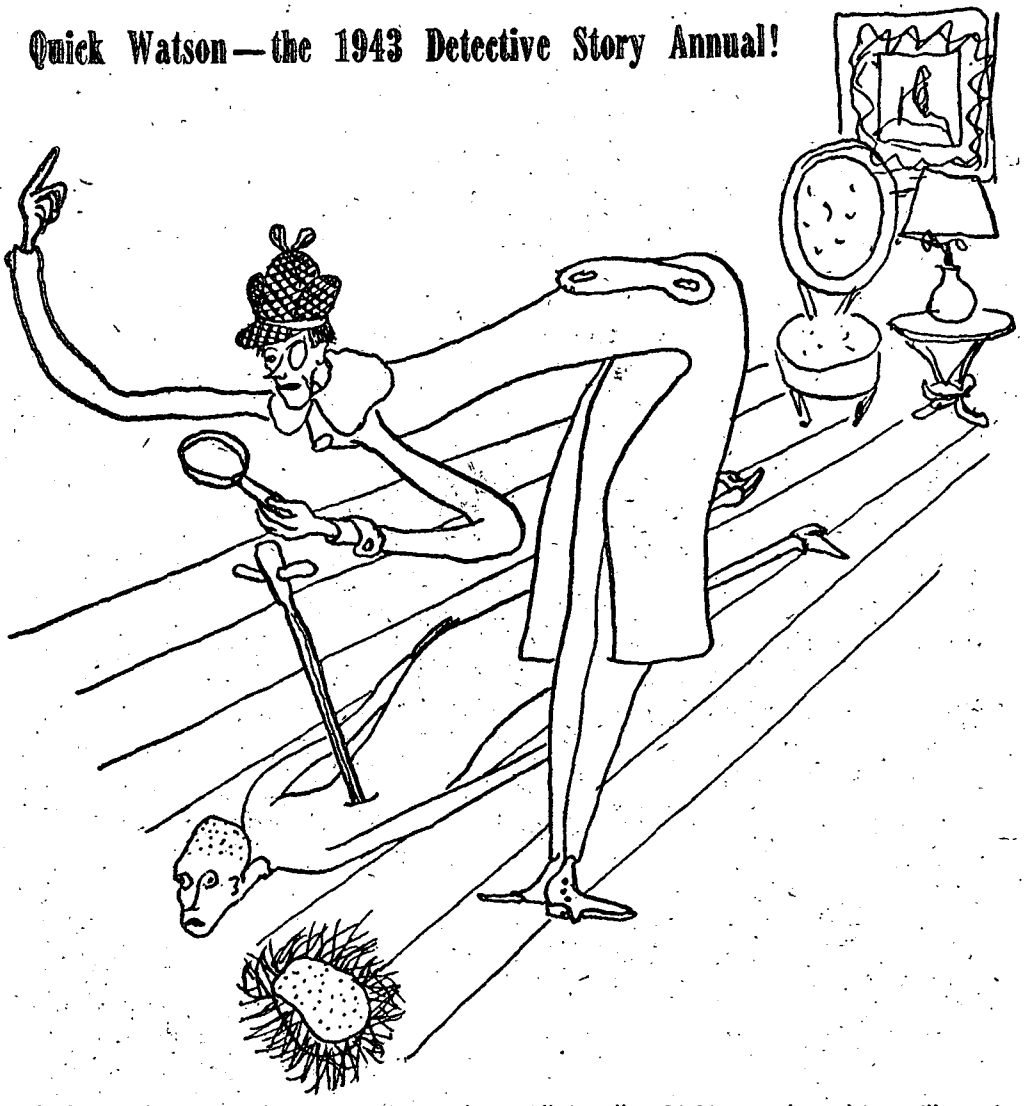

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GOLD FOR GUNHAWKS

by CLEVE ENDICOTT

The Circle J pards thundered into that strange set-up in the canyon of the conquistadores—and began promptly to think that the supposed hidden treasure had put its tricky curse upon their heads!

As one bandit's noose cast missed, the other's six-gun roared twice at Buck.

CHAPTER I.

PREY FOR THE PUMA.

Up there on top of a large foothill overlooking El Rancho Esteban, a crafty plan was budding in the brain of one of California's most ruthless bandits.

From the motte of trees which concealed him, he peered through a telescope at the vast expanse of the Spanish ranch. For several days past, the bandit had been watching patiently. He was a lean, hard man; his eyes had the black brightness of some strange animal and his facial expression was one of harsh irony. None of his followers knew his real

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name or whence he had come to this country. They called him the Puma and he lived up to the name, striking swiftly and at the right time—with more than a little guile.

He turned now to a half-breed and said tersely:

"I see them. They go to find the treasure, eh, Jemez?"

"*Si*. Yes." Jeméz nodded.

"The son of the ranchero and the old mossyhorn from Montana—just those two."

"*Si*, Señor Puma."

"They go maybe four or five miles north of the ranchhouse, to the Arroyo Conquistadore, you heard them say, eh?"

Jemez nodded. The muscles around his left eye twitched every four or five seconds, which gave him a nervous appearance. He wasn't very big and though he wore the garb of the typical California vaquero he was different from most of them: he was more ambitious. For several weeks past, he had been a hired vaquero at El Rancho Esteban—learning things undercover for Puma.

"The other men from Montana—you're certain they value the old mossyhorn highly though he's a windy old jackass?" Puma gazed intently at the half-breed.

Jemez nodded again. "It is strange but true, señor."

"Then we go now quietly," Puma said.

MORE than a mile away and heading northward from the ranch buildings were the two objects of the hidden bandits' discussion.

The elder of the two was Buck Foster, the Montana mossyhorn. Together with his three pards—Billy West, Joe Scott and Sing Lo—Buck had been a guest at El Rancho Esteban for nearly six weeks, since a violent New Year's Eve battle had cleared up a misunderstanding between the pards and Don Esteban Vasora, who owned the rancho.

The younger man was Don Felipe Vasora, son of the owner of El Rancho Esteban. Don Felipe, about twenty-one, had a handsome appearance and an agreeable disposition.

Each rode a prancing palomino, of that spirited Spanish breed so well-marked by their golden hides and their silver-platinum manes and tails.

Buck Foster carried a slender four-foot length of witch-hazel twig in his left hand—a twig which Don Felipe regarded with amusement.

"So you are assured, Señor Foster, that the divining rod works as superbly for hidden gold as for water?" The young ranchero idly lighted a cigarro.

"Waal, by ganny, a old prospector amigo o' mine up in Montanner claims he found his strike with one o' these hyar witch-hazel wands. Leastways, he hit it purty rich, the dang fool. Throwed most o' his gold away in gamblin' halls, though."

"So the wand dips down when it is over the gold, does it?"

"Thet's whut the old cuss claimed—an' I never knowed him to tell a lie." Buck meditated a moment, rubbed his chin and squinted one brown eye. "Not many times, thet is. I reckon he was tellin' the truth about this hyar witch-hazel."

"Did you ever try it before?" Felipe asked.

"Waal . . . yas. Tried sev'ral sprigs up around Montanner."

"Did you ever discover gold?"

"Waal . . . no. Not exactly. But then I figger it was just because I didn't hold it over the right spot. Thar has to be gold within a few feet o' the surface o' the ground, or the wand won't dip down. The old

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miner galoot told me that when he hit his strike, the dang wand dipped down an' quivered like a fishpole with a big trout on the end."

Don Felipe smiled tolerantly. He liked Buck but properly thought the old Montana puncher was suffering from fallen arches of the brain.

Buck said: "Yuh been lookin' in this hyar Arroyo Conkwistadoor before, huh, an' never found no gold?"

"Yes." Again Don Felipe smiled. "The legend of the conquistadore gold is like that of your wand, amigo. It is open to doubt. There is no proof that it exists."

"But I heard thar was a map o' some kind thet—"

"So indeed there was," the young Spaniard agreed. "Some years ago an aged servant of my father told us of the legend handed down through his family for more than three hundred years. His ancestors had been servants to the early conquistadores when they conquered California. A parchment scroll had been handed down from them, through all the generations, with all afraid to seek the gold because it is accursed. As you know, the peons of my race are extremely superstitious in such matters. So they had never once shown the scroll to anyone for more than three centuries—at least not to anyone outside their family."

"How come thet servant told yuh about it, then?"

"He was dying and he wished for my father to have all his possessions, including the scroll, to do with as he desired."

"Waal, didn't yuh desire no gold?"

Felipe shrugged musedly. "We are not immune to the lure of gold, I confess. But the scroll was so worn that it was almost illegible. Once it had been a fairly readable map, beyond doubt. But when it came into the sight of my father and me, the markings were worn off save for one place where we could barely decipher some words. It—"

"Whut'd the words say?"

"They said that gold of the conquistadores was hidden in Arroyo Conquistadore—and death to him who disturbed it! At least, it was thus we pieced the fragments of words together. As you may know, a tribe of savage Indians cornered and annihilated a group of conquistadores in the Arroyo more than three hundred years ago."

"Nope, I didn't know thet," said Buck.

"The Arroyo is really more like a canyon. Or perhaps you could call it an arroyo within a canyon." Don Felipe glanced back over his shoulder. "Your friends must be still absorbed in the game of cards with my father, for I fail to see them following us."

"They likely won't be along a-tall." Buck grunted. "When thet red-headed young galoot Joe Scott gits to winnin' at cards, he wants to play all day."

Buck referred to the fact that he had left his three pards—Boss Billy West, red-headed Joe Scott and Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook—playing the Spanish game of *con quien*, called "coon can" by most cowboys, with Don Esteban Vasora, their host. Buck had no patience with all the rules of the slightly complicated game, and Felipe didn't care much for cards.

So the young Spaniard had volunteered to take Buck for a look at the canyon of supposedly hidden gold—after Buck had kept hinting that he wanted to explore it. The other three pards had stated that they might come along later, if the card game palled. It was the first real vacation the pards had enjoyed in several years, and Don Esteban

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was hosting them with all the best, for the Montanans had recovered from bandits a sizable amount of badly needed money which had been stolen from the ranchero on New Year's Eve. Within a few weeks, Billy West intended to start back to Montana and his Circle J Ranch, shipping a herd of fine palomino horses he had bought from the ranchero.

BUCK FOSTER and Don Felipe continued north across the rolling foothills, left the ranch and proceeded into terrain somewhat more rugged.

The palomino Buck bestrode was one of the herd Billy West had bought. Don Felipe's was his own. At first glance there seemed to be little difference in the two animals. Both were handsome and well-kept, each was spirited and intelligent, as was common with that superior breed. But there was a difference: Don Felipe's mount was well-trained, well-broken to saddle and used to its rider. Buck's horse was less well-broken, not used to Buck's presence —and particularly not used to Buck's walrus mustache, which moved alarmingly in the breeze, nor to his smelly old bearskin vest, which made the animal's sensitive nostrils quiver.

"How much farther, pardner?" Buck asked presently.

"Perhaps a mile."

Buck glanced up at the sun. "Waal, it ain't much more'n one o'clock in the afternoon, so I reckon we can take a look-see fer a while an' still git back to the hashienda in time fer supper."

"Certainly. If your witch-hazel wand proves as splendid as you think it will, we shall return wealthy—and accursed, no doubt." Don Felipe smiled. He had long ago learned to suspect the ability of any kind of willowish wand to discover even water—and as for discovering buried gold with such a thing, it was an idea quite absurd.

Within a few minutes they edged the two palominos down into a small valley which gradually changed into a canyon as it proceeded north on a slight upslope.

The canyon averaged about a hundred yards wide, with a gravelly arroyo of from fifteen to twenty feet wide down the middle of it. This arroyo, with weeds growing up through the gravel, evidently had been the bed of a stream at some time in the past.

"Whar'd the water come from?" Buck asked, squinting. "Looks like a dead-end canyon."

Felipe nodded. "Yes, it is a box canyon. At some period long gone a waterfall perhaps tumbled from the northern rim down into this canyon, to create this arroyo."

Buck grunted, scowled. The canyon was a good half mile long, with trees and bushes growing quite profusely on each side of the arroyo. It was fifty or sixty feet to the top of the canyon walls, though in places it sloped up somewhat gradually in the manner of a valley. A good horse, finding an old game trail through the underbrush, might have been able to go up either side to east or west—with luck.

"And now?" Felipe asked.

"It'll take a heap o' lookin' to cover all the ground in this canyon, by ganny." Buck grunted, flexed his witch-hazel wand off to the left side of his gold-and-platinum mount. "Likely take me a couple days to wave this hyar sprig all over the whole cussed canyon."

"You perhaps would like to ride to the far end to see it all first," said Felipe.

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"Might as well, I reckon," Buck muttered.

They headed their horses up that way, in the arroyo.

It was a pleasantly warm February day. The sun shone down on them as they started toward the canyon's north end.

Then the Puma struck.

CHAPTER II.

ANGRY ARMOR.

THE Puma had reinforced himself with his three regular owlhoot helpers at his hidden camp back east of the rancho. He had left Jemez at the camp. The three owlhooters were non-Spanish Americans who had been in Puma's pack for several years. They had remained in it because they had shown their loyalty to him on a number of other enterprises. All three were handy with their guns, and two of them were better-than-average ropers.

It was these latter two who went into action now so unexpectedly.

On foot, hidden behind bush clumps on each side of the curving arroyo, the two roper owlhooters cast their nooses at the same moment—as Buck Foster and Don Felipe, in the arroyo below the ropers, rode abreast of and slightly past the place where the two hemp-slinging outlaws waited, across from each other.

The two nooses were cast. The one from the west side of the arroyo fell true—down over Don Felipe, pinning his arms to his sides and jerking him roughly from the saddle almost in the same instant.

But the noose cast from the east side had less success. Buck Foster's mount, already nervous and high-strung, saw the noose and heard the swish of it before it landed.

The palomino leaped frantically forward, nearly unseating the old puncher from Montana. Buck started to yell "Whoa!" but had no more than half the word out when the fore end of the noose hit the back of his neck with a soggy thud. Then the noose plopped down onto the spirited palomino's back—to make the animal even more skittish.

It lunged ahead with frantic new speed. Buck started to haul back on the reins, just as a matter of instinct. But he rapidly changed his tactics when a harsh voice yelled from somewhere behind him:

"Pull up or I'll salivate you, hombre!"

Buck took one quick look behind him, saw a six-gun leveling at him hastily through a bush clump—and the old Montanan decided this was no time to make a stand. The arroyo and canyon curved to the east just up ahead. Buck whacked the palomino briskly on the left flank with his willowy length of witch-hazel.

The six-gun roared twice. One bullet nicked the rim of Buck's floppy old black sombrero and the other whined past his ear.

Then he was around the bend and safely out of sight for the moment. He hauled back on the reins, intending to turn around and get himself organized to swap lead with the ambushers.

But he hadn't calculated the spirit of his palomino. The palomino breed is a proud one. Seldom will one take much in the way of beating or abuse. This one wouldn't. It wasn't much more than half broken to saddle at best, having been ridden but a few short times in the past.

Now the golden-platinum animal clamped the steel bit in its middle teeth—and it would have been easier to have pulled its head off than to

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get that bit back into the tender back part of its mouth, which is the part where pressure has to hit to stop any runaway horse.

"Whoa, yuh danged crowbait!" Buck roared, adding a few other words less courteous.

It did no good. The palomino intended to get somewhere else and it was getting there in a hurry.

Buck's temper wasn't improved any by the knowledge that Felipe would think he was a coward and deliberately running away, fleeing from the fracas and leaving Felipe in the hands of the unknown owlhooters. The Spanish Californios were mighty sensitive about things like that.

The arroyo straightened out again for several hundred yards. The banks of the arroyo were still about six feet high, level with the horse's head and pretty steep. Even if he could turn the horse up either bank in hope of stopping it, Buck knew the risk would be great. The animal might fall on him or slip, and in either case Buck might be knocked out—a thing he decidedly didn't want. Dimly in the distance he could hear shouts; the owlhooters likely were heading for their horses to take up the chase.

Although Buck had professed to be forty-seven years old for the past five years, he knew well enough that his bones weren't so limber as they had been once. If he leaped off this horse going at a full run he might break an arm or a leg or even a neck. And broken bones didn't mend so rapidly at his age.

Besides, the horse was rapidly approaching the blind north end of the canyon. "The dang critter'll *have* to stop, by ganny. It can't run right through a stone wall." That was what *he* thought.

The north end of the arroyo sloped up, and from its top to the north wall of the canyon there was about ten yards of slightly sloping ground covered with several varieties of bushy evergreen trees. Buck figured the horse would slow up and stop in the trees.

He figured wrong.

For the palomino plunged right on up into the trees at full speed. Buck closed his eyes to keep them from getting knocked out and ducked his head lower.

He opened his eyes momentarily, saw the slate-black stone of the cliff just a couple of jumps ahead. The palomino saw it too, for the first time. It was too late for the animal to stop.

And it was then that the horse proved the error of Buck's doubt about its ability to dent a stone wall.

For the horse hit the blackish stone—at any rate it looked like stone—and went right on through!

Buck again had closed his eyes, too petrified even to try to fling himself from the saddle—and when he heard the brittle splintering noise of the cracking stone wall he nearly swooned in astonishment.

Something broke against his head, not very painfully. There was sudden dust and a heavy musty smell in his nostrils. Then the horse tripped over something, floundered to its knees in the dim light and lurched forward—hurtling Buck forward over its head.

The old Montana puncher landed hard against something that made a horrible metallic clatter. And his witch-hazel wand flopped down atop something square and rusty and well-filled.

BACK down the canyon, the Puma's eyes narrowed to black slits of anger as the rope hit the back of Buck's neck and slapped down onto

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the palomino's rump. It was Puma himself who, there on the east bank of the arroyo by the miscasting roper, jerked his six-gun and fired it twice, hastily, through the bush clump at Buck's fleeing figure. Then Buck was out of sight.

"You knot-headed tenderfoot!" Puma snarled at his roper owlhooter. "He's getting away!"

"That gold hoss heard the noose comin'," growled the roper. "It ain't my fault."

"You should have aimed farther ahead!" Puma snapped. But even then he was crashing back through the bushes to where they had hidden their horses in the trees, several rods away.

Puma flung himself into the saddle, gesturing to his roper and to the spare owlhooter on the other side of the arroyo to do the same.

The roper on the west side had rushed down into the arroyo, keeping the noose tight on Felipe, and flung himself at the stunned Spanish youth. The young ranchero was moaning slightly, only half conscious.

"Tie him up tight and stay with him!" Puma ordered, sliding his mount over the edge down into the arroyo and taking up the pursuit of Buck Foster. The outlaw leader beckoned brusquely to the other two. "Hurry it up, you hombres! That old Montana mossyhorn has a big lead on us already—and he might be able to get up over the rim of the canyon on one of those old overgrown game trails."

Puma was more upset outwardly than he was inwardly. This had been a bad break, and a man had to expect a bad break once in a while—especially after things had been going well for a considerable period of time, as they had been for Puma and his small gang. But he didn't doubt their ability to run Buck Foster down. His getting away for the moment seemed no more than a small annoyance.

The scheme, as was usual with those hatched by Puma, was to rely more on guile and patience than on brute force. He had been planning for some time to kidnap Don Felipe and hold him for ransom; Puma well knew how the proud Don Esteban Vasora valued his only son. However, Puma had been holding off and relying upon smaller jobs to keep him going, because he had learned that Don Esteban was at least temporarily short of ready money.

But when the undercover man, Jemez, had told Puma about the visit of the four Montanans, Puma had made his plans afresh. For Billy West had some ten thousand dollars which he had several days ago paid to Don Esteban for eighty head of the palomino horses. So Don Esteban now had plenty of ready money to pay out for ransom. And probably that Montana rancher, Billy West, had plenty in reserve to ransom the old mossyhorn whom they liked so well in spite of his muleheadedness. At least it seemed likely that any man who could pay ten thousand cash for horses would have more money or would be able to raise some in a hurry.

Today's break was the one for which Puma had been waiting—and he certainly didn't intend to let this slight delay put a crimp into his plans.

It certainly wasn't difficult for him to follow the trail of Buck's horse. The undergrowth in the arroyo wasn't very heavy, and those hoofprints were the only recent ones made in the gravelly dirt.

The other two mounted owlhoot-

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ers were thundering along a hundred yards or so behind their leader.

As he approached the northern end of the box canyon, Puma frowned. There was no sign of Buck Foster or the palomino, although the hoofprints in the arroyo were plain as ever. Puma slowed his horse somewhat, kept his six-gun ready. No doubt Foster was skulking there in the trees at the end of the canyon.

The outlaw leader waved silently back at his two followers, telling them to follow his lead. Puma dismounted, edged forward to the upslope of the arroyo toward where the trees filled the space for ten yards or so to the slate-black dead end of the towering, outjutting cliff.

That palomino had broken a clear path through the evergreens, certainly enough. It had broken off limbs, smashed down saplings, but even so, the view was partly obstructed. Especially because Puma was keeping close to the ground and advancing cautiously, keeping behind what cover was afforded.

Halfway up the arroyo incline to the evergreens, Puma crouched behind a small boulder toward the west side of the arroyo.

"All right, mossyhorn," Puma said in a low tone. "Come out of there with your hands high and you won't get hurt. I'm merely going to hold you for ransom. Won't cost *you* a nickel to stay alive and to go free later. But if you insist on making a fight of it, we'll be obliged to burn you down."

Puma waited. There was no answer.

The outlaw leader raised up presently, peered intently through the trees toward the cliff wall. He couldn't see much there except vague shadow. The sun wasn't shining down into this part of the canyon.

Then, suddenly, out of the shadow and seemingly out of the very face of the cliff itself, there appeared a strange and almost ghostly figure!

It looked like a knight of yore—a knight in bright armor, including a complete slot-faced head helmet. But there was incongruity in the knight's gear—for in his right hand there was a quite modern double-action .45 six-gun! That six-gun was taking quick aim at Puma's head.

Puma took even quicker aim, and the two guns roared almost as one. The knight's bullet whined viciously just an inch or so above where Puma's head had recently been above the rock.

The outlaw leader's bullet whanged against the armor. So did his three following bullets—*bong, bong, bong!*

CHAPTER III.

TWO-PRONGED PLAN.

BUCK FOSTER'S fall over the head of the palomino there in the mysterious cave or tunnel or whatever it was—and he didn't stop to wonder exactly what it was—stunned the old Montana puncher for only a moment.

He soon sat up dazedly, looked around him in the gloom. He jerked his hand up hastily, stared aghast at what he had been touching.

It was more than somewhat disconcerting to find that he had landed smack-dab in the bones of an ancient skeleton. Lying right near the skeleton was a shining suit of armor, upon which Buck had landed partly.

The armor wasn't rusty at all, doubtless because the cave had been so well sealed with the inch-thick slate—which had been made to look exactly like part of the cliff wall—

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that little moisture had gotten into the cave.

Buck didn't stop to surmise that the ancient conquistadore, in the midst of whose skeleton he sat, had probably taken off the heavy armor in order that he might die more comfortably. The haft and head of an Indian arrow lay among the bones, the once-wooden haft turning to dust long since, though retaining its shape. Buck touched it, and it was dust all right.

Nearby the golden horse was standing, snorting softly and trembling, still dazed from its own fall, when it had struck its head on the hard rock floor of the cave.

The cave seemed to be fairly roomy. At least the horse could stand upright in it.

For a few moments Buck blinked and collected his scant array of wits. The first thing he remembered was that the palomino had somehow crashed right through the rock side of the cliff. This didn't make sense to him at the moment. The second thing he remembered was that some owlhooters had tried to rope him off his horse—and that those owlhooters doubtless were coming this way in hot pursuit right now.

Buck staggered to the shadowy entrance, which was nearly seven feet high and ten or twelve feet wide, though the horse had not knocked out all the concealing slab of slate. He peered out cautiously.

Dimly he could see Puma spurring his horse into a run, shouting orders back at his men and heading this way.

The old Circle J puncher slapped at his holster, found that his six-gun was missing. He staggered back into the cave, felt around on the floor and found where the gun had fallen out as he had been pitched over the palomino's head. The gun, in fact, had fallen right next to the suit of armor—and that gave Buck one of the few sound ideas he had known in the course of a lifetime.

He reasoned that this cave might well be a dead-end one, with no escape except through the front. From the corner of his eye he had seen Don Felipe snatched out of the fray. So there wasn't much hope of Buck's shooting it out with a flock of gunmen—he didn't know how many there were—all by himself.

But the armor, now, might be a help.

He tried on the headpiece and it fitted fairly well. He tried on the jointed body section. It, too, fitted—though a little loosely.

Buck managed to get it on. It was heavy, but it was also good protection. The armor makers of three hundred or more years ago had known their stuff, because armor had been very important then.

He moved to the entrance, crouched down as best he could in the cumbersome metal suit.

It was about that time that Puma crouched behind his rock, raised up and stated his proposition. His four bullets followed.

And it was then that Buck stated his answer—with the six-gun. His first shot missed because Puma ducked an instant ahead of it. Buck's second and third shots chipped the top of Puma's rock. Then the cantankerous old puncher held his fire for a few moments in order to size up the situation.

BEHIND his rock, Puma was for the moment taken aback. Though a cool and calculating man, given to only occasional fits of temper, the lean bandit chief had expected no such apparition to challenge him. For a moment that superstitious fear which lies dormant in every human

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held him in its grip. Was this really a ghost of the distant past?

A few moments of quick meditation, however, told Puma that such things couldn't be. But what *was* the answer, then?

The outlaw couldn't see too well through the trees, but gradually his sharp eyes dimly made out the fresh opening in the cliff wall.

It was then that the truth flashed on Puma—with more power than he could take calmly.

"Blisterin' buffalo!" the bandit muttered. And through his head ran the electrifying thought: "That old mossyhorn cowpuncher accidentally plowed right into the hiding place of that conquistadore gold that Jemez told me was supposed to be concealed somewhere in this canyon. I never took much stock in the story, because Jemez didn't know much about it. But this *must* be that hiding place, because those ancient conquistadores had a habit of dying beside their hidden gold. They were almost as fond of gold as I am."

Puma thought it over for a while. Yes, this certainly must be the hidden cave—because where else could that Montana puncher have gotten the suit of armor?

Maybe there was a fortune of Spanish gold in that cave. In fact, there was almost certain to be. A fortune worth perhaps ten or twenty times what Puma might get in ransom for both the young ranchero and the old puncher from Montana.

Furthermore, it occurred to Puma, the old Montanan might very possibly be so dumb that he didn't know what he had discovered. It was dark in that cave and the old puncher hadn't had much time to look around, what with getting into that armor and all.

That armor presented a serious barrier. It was so rounded that nine out of ten bullets would glance off without even knocking the old puncher down. And even a direct, square hit would likely do no more than knock Foster down, making a dent in the armor.

In short, Buck Foster was a movable fort all by himself. Even a rifle might not be able to put him away—though neither Puma nor his men had carried a rifle along on this job, having figured such a heavy weapon wouldn't be necessary.

Puma realized that he could take no chances of letting the old puncher make a getaway, for that might spoil both the kidnaping set-up and Puma's hope of getting the gold. Gold is heavy stuff; a fourteen-inch cube of it weighs a ton, which isn't a weight any bandit can sling over his shoulder and ride away with. If there was any great quantity of it, it might be necessary to bring in pack animals to take the gold away.

The bandit leader was aware of all the difficulties. A small bad break—Buck Foster's escape from the noose—had led to this very good break of getting a probable fortune in gold. But this in turn led to the bad break of having the old Montanan decked out in that armor. Which in turn led to a further bad break of eating up precious time. Puma knew that the failure of the young ranchero and the old puncher to return by sundown would be noticed back at the ranch—and a searching party undoubtedly would come out here looking for the two.

The gun battle that would ensue was the last thing Puma desired. He much preferred the use of cunning. It was a great deal safer.

Puma's immediate problem was to hold Buck Foster from escaping or to knock him out, at least, with bullets. Neither would be an easy feat.

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Another feat that wouldn't be easy, Puma suddenly realized, was to make his own getaway from behind his sheltering rock. There wasn't any other good shelter near it; and if Puma got out into the open to make a run for it, Buck Foster might pick him off with a .45 bullet.

Puma's two gunmen had flung themselves off their horses a few rods farther down the arroyo, at the first exchange of gunfire. They could not be seen by Buck Foster. On the other hand, they couldn't see Buck to shoot at him, either.

If he could knock Foster out of it, Puma knew he might get the gold and the ransom money, too.

The outlaw leader intended to make a try. Already his crafty brain had figured out a two-pronged plan. He started to put it into action.

CHAPTER IV.

STONES FOR SLAUGHTER.

MEANWHILE Buck Foster had sat down on something that stuck up from the floor just inside the entrance to his cave. The armor was heavy and he was still somewhat dizzy from his fall. He could see no reason to waste his strength and offer himself as a full target. In fact, Buck wasn't so confident about the bullet-resistant qualities of the armor as Puma was. The outlaw's bullets, though they had hit the armor glancingly, had put heavy dents in it, and the shock of the bullets had rocked Buck back on his heels; it had been mostly the weight of the armor that kept him from being knocked down. Besides, this armor had joints and the joints offered chinks. That skeleton Spaniard had died likely because some Indian's arrow had found a chink in the armor and gone right on through the Spaniard's body so that he couldn't pull the arrow out even though he could get the armor off.

The air was a little better in the cave now because of the fresh air coming through the opening. But it still smelled musty and depressing nevertheless. It was gloomy back in the cave and Buck couldn't make out what all was in it. He could see little more than the outline of the still-frightened palomino behind him.

Anyway, with death crouching out there behind a rock and farther down the arroyo, Buck wasn't primarily concerned about the contents of the cave. As usual, he hankered to win this fracas—but he didn't want to get killed doing it.

From where he sat he could keep an eye on the rock behind which the outlaw leader was hidden. The tree limbs and twigs which partly blocked the vision didn't make aiming any too easy for either. But, at least, Buck could see to it that the outlaw didn't get away from behind the rock.

The old Circle J puncher glanced down presently to see what he was sitting on. He felt of it and grunted. Seemed to be something like one of those spike-toothed harrows that farmers used, except that it was longer and narrower and the spikes were longer and very sharp. Whatever it was, the palomino had stumbled over it.

A slight noise down in the arroyo caught Buck's attention. He peered out sharply, saw the outlaw's right arm flash up and back to throw something back down the arroyo—away from the cave. It was a penciled note of instructions wrapped around a rock, though Buck didn't know that.

If he had known what the note ordered, the old Montanan would have walked out there then with his

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gun blazing. But he didn't know what was in store for him, and he wasn't in the mood just then to take needless chances.

Instead, he winged a quick shot at the bandit's upraised arm and missed.

Then it settled down to a stalemate. Buck didn't say anything because his voice was muffled behind the slightly slitted metal helmet. Puma said nothing because he realized Buck was too pigheaded ever to surrender; then, too, the old puncher might become curious and venture out of the cave, and Puma might be able to shoot him through the hands or below the knees, where there was no armor to protect him.

THE bandit who had received the thrown note crept back to his horse, mounted and sped back down the arroyo. He was in sight for only a few rods, and the range was long for accuracy with a six-gun—especially for one aimed through tree branches—so Buck Foster's two waspish bullets whined by off to one side. Then the bandit was out of sight.

Having thus had proof that escape was fairly safe, the second bandit—who also had read the order contained in the note—mounted and followed in the tracks of the first. Again Buck Foster flung a couple of shots, and again they missed by several feet.

Half a mile down the arroyo, at the original ambush spot, the two pulled up beside the third bandit, who was patiently standing guard over the trussed-up Don Felipe, as Puma had ordered.

"Well?" inquired the third man. "What was all the shootin'? You nail the old galoot?"

"No," said the first bandit, who was bulkier than the other two. "But we will."

"How? What's the set-up?"

"The old gander ducked into some kind of a cave and found some old Spanish armor. Six-gun bullets're not much account against that. So the boss wants to smoke him out of the cave before somebody comes out from the ranch lookin' for these two."

"What do I do with this young Felipe hombre?"

"Take him back to our camp on his horse. I'm ridin' on ahead, full-speed, to get some stuff and bring it back. Jake here"—the bulky bandit gestured at the second man—"goes up on the cliff to make sure the old galoot doesn't make a get-away."

"What about Puma?"

"He's stayin' up there hid behind a rock to keep an eye on the old mossyhorn while we do our jobs. Once we get the mossyhorn, the whole ransom deal'll be easy. That old ranchero, Don Esteban, thinks a heap of this son. You can bet the old don won't want him to get hurt. We'll get the ransom money easy and safe."

"If that old goat in the armor don't crimp our plans," Jake, the second man, pointed out. "He seems like a right stubborn old cowhand."

"He won't be stubborn when I get through with him," the bulky bandit promised. "I'm goin' to get a cure and bring it back."

"What?"

"It'll announce itself," said the bulky one, who enjoyed acting mysterious.

They put Felipe into the saddle of his palomino and tied his feet together under its belly. His hands already were tied behind him and he was gagged.

Together they rode up out of the arroyo and, by means of a concealed

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game trail, up onto the east rim of the canyon.

There they parted.

Jake headed north alone, keeping out of Buck Foster's sight. The bulky bandit spurred on ahead to the gang's camp, which was located in a deep sink about two miles northeast of the canyon.

The third outlaw, leading the palomino which carried Felipe, also headed for the outlaw camp, but necessarily at a slower pace.

IT was about a half-hour later that Buck Foster, letting his curiosity put its grasp on him, lifted the visor of his helmet and bellowed down at the rock in the arroyo:

"Hey, down thar! Yuh gone to sleep?"

No answer.

"Whut kind o' shindig is this, anyway?" Buck roared irately. "What was the idee o' tryin' to rope me?"

Again no answer.

"Yuh yeller-bellied polecat! Come out in the open!"

Still no answer.

Although Buck was suspicious of most things, especially those things he couldn't understand, his action usually took the wrong direction. It did this time. For one thing, he was fed up with the musty smell of the cave and the helmet; and the armor was too heavy and stiff for comfort. He was puzzled by lack of knowledge of how many there were in the opposing gang. Too, he had been secretly hoping his pards would show up from the ranch and muscle into the fracas. That hope was ebbing with each slight further dip of the afternoon sun.

Well, maybe the armor would protect him till he got a good clear shot at the gunman behind the rock—if he was still behind the rock.

So Buck stepped out into the open, cautiously at first and then with more confidence. He took four or five steps away from the cave mouth, six-gun ready for instant action.

There was no sign of anybody behind the rock.

He took another step.

It was then he realized things were not so quiet as they seemed.

Almost at the same moment, Puma's right arm thrust up over the rock and triggered the six-gun viciously. The bullets whanged heavily against the breastplate and left pallette of Buck's suit of armor. And it turned out to be lucky for him that the bullets struck as they did, for the impact of each was like that of a medium-heavy sledge hammer.

The power of the bullets knocked Buck off-balance just enough so that the head-sized stone which hurtled down from a hundred feet above barely grazed his metal shoulder piece. Though Buck didn't know it at the time, that big stone had been heaved down by Jake, who had been sent to the cliff top for that very purpose.

Jake had more big stones up there and he tossed them down. But, having been unnerved slightly by the bad luck of his near first miss, his following attempts were off the target by anywhere from one to three feet.

Puma, to take better aim, put his head around the side of his protecting rock—and nearly lost his nose. Buck threw a couple of quick shots that way, the second fanning the breeze close past Puma's thin beak, and the blackeyed bandit chief hastily pulled his head back, calling upward:

"Jake! Nail him with one of those stones before he gets up!"

"That talks easier'n it works!" Jake yelled down in reply, and tossed

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The dynamite hit the top of the boulder and skidded right down into Jake's face.

another stone along with his words.

This stone clanked glancingly off the cuisse, that part of the armor which protected each thigh. Buck had partly risen. It knocked him down again and he decided it was time to be getting back into his cave, musty smell or no musty smell.

He got—before Jake could toss down another of the murderous stones.

Buck clanked in through the mouth of the cave and sat down again on the harrowlike thing—which, although Buck didn't realize it, had been another death trap set by those conquistadores more than three hundred years before. It had been suspended inside above the mouth of the cave by wires, and so fixed that anyone who discovered the slate barrier and broke through it would automatically trip the thing down on the head of anyone who entered—sure death to the seeker of the conquistadores' gold. But the weight of the strange weapon had broken the wires many years past, to drop it to the floor.

The old Montanan was irate but somewhat baffled. He couldn't go out there any more, at least not until after dark. And if he went out after dark one of those bandits would

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likely be hiding close by to pounce and finish him off. In fact, his prospects were about as bright as the inside of that cave. And something worse was being prepared for him.

CHAPTER V.

TRIGGER TREACHERY.

AT El Rancho Esteban the card game consumed the greater share of the afternoon. Don Esteban Vasora was a genteel ranchero in his early fifties, with a graying goatee. He was amiable as well as polite with those he liked, and the Circle J pards were among those he favored. Their ways were rougher and tougher than those of his other friends, but he liked the Americanos' straightforward manner and their honesty.

It was but little more than an hour and a half to sundown when Don Esteban glanced at the big clock on the wall and mused:

"Amigo Foster and my son must indeed have discovered the accursed gold, else they would have returned by now."

Red-headed Joe Scott laughed. "Buck likely wants to test every square foot of ground with that wand of his. He's still got a couple thousand dollars he won in a crap game before he left Montana, and havin' that much seems to have made him greedier."

"I guess nobody minds finding a fortune in gold, even if it happens to have a curse on it," said Billy West, well-set-up young owner of the Circle J spread. "If you've run your luck to the limit at this *con quien* game, Joe, we might take a lope out that away and see what they've found, if anything. We haven't been in a saddle for two days, and if that keeps on our legs are apt to grow straight again."

"Wouldn't want that to happen," Joe said. "Let's go. Like to come along, Don Esteban? And you, Sing?"

"Thank you, but I have some matters to which I must attend here on the rancho," Don Esteban stated politely.

"Sing Lo helpee cookee with suppeh," the little Chinese cook told them. "Likee cookee betteh than lidee hossback."

"In that case, I reckon we'll have to go get rich and accursed all by ourselves, boss," Joe said.

Billy West nodded briskly.

Several minutes later they were heading northward at a distance-eating lope, following the tracks made earlier by the horses of Buck Foster and Don Felipe. West and Scott, traveling at a faster clip to beat sunset, also were mounted on palominos—two of the lot which Billy West had bought from the ranchero.

"No sign of 'em comin' home," Joe muttered after a couple of miles. "You reckon Buck could've got into another ruckus?"

"He seldom misses a chance if there's one anywhere around," said Billy West. "But I don't see how there could be much chance out in this empty foothill country, unless maybe he crossed tempers with a rattlesnake."

"You reckon there's really some gold hid out here, like in the legend and that wore-out map?"

West shrugged. "There's plenty of buried gold out in this country, but it's mighty seldom anybody ever discovers it."

They rode silently for several more miles and were some distance away from Don Esteban's rancho's northern boundary.

"That canyon ought to show up pretty soon," Joe stated.

"Yes," said West. He frowned and made a slight gesture toward

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the northeast. "Wonder who that hombre is. He's heading thisaway in a right pert hurry."

"Looks like a vaquero."

West nodded. "Rides like one, all right."

The distance between them lessened.

"It's that Jemez," said Joe. "The half-breed with the twitchy eye. Wonder what he wants."

Jemez rode up, slid his mount to a stop, his left hand held up, palm forward.

"Señores!" the half-breed exclaimed, his eye muscles twitching nervously. "It is *malo* news I am obliged to impart!"

"Bad news?" West's eyebrows lifted inquiringly.

"*Si.* Yes. As you know, I am the honest vaquero who ponches the cow for Don Esteban. Thees afternoon, from a distance while on Don Esteban's range, I see the Señor Buck Foster and Don Felipe ride toward Arroyo Conquistadore to seek the accursed hidden gold."

"So?"

"I watch from a deestance through thees spyglass"—he tapped a short telescope in a case tied to a saddle string—"an' I see four bandidos capture el Señores Buck an' Don Felipe. I am several mile away, but I follow them an'—"

"How come you watched 'em through the spyglass?" Joe asked.

"Why . . . I weesh merely to see who ees riding toward El Arroyo Conquistadore. Eeet ees w'ile I watch that the bandidos capture the two amigo señores."

Billy West nodded slowly. "What then?"

"I follow to see where they take the two señores."

"And then?"

"I follow them three or four mile from the rancho toward the nort'-east—an' I geet too close to them."

"So?"

"Wan of them ride een bushes an' steeck me up from behin'." Jemez pointed down to his empty holster. "They take my gon an' I theenk maybe they weesh to shoot me. But no—they tell me eet ees fine I come along, so I can ride back to the rancho an' tell Don Esteban an' you that the Señores Don Felipe an' Señor Buck weel be keel onless you are send by me twenty thousan' pesos Americano to the bandidos at their secret camp."

Slowly, Billy West and Joe Scott turned their heads, stared at each other.

THIS tale being told by Jemez was far from the strict truth. For this act of Jemez was part of the instructions Puma had written in the note he had tossed to the bulkier bandit. Puma had realized it was going to take time to get Buck Foster out of that cave which possibly contained a fortune in ancient gold. Puma also knew that as the afternoon waned and twilight approached there was danger that some searching party might come out from the rancho to see why Felipe and Buck Foster had not returned from their jaunt.

Hence Puma's note had told the bulky bandit to order Jemez to ride back toward the ranch to intercept anybody who might be coming out and to tell them the story he was now telling West and Scott.

Puma's theory was that any riders from the rancho would certainly return to tell Don Esteban of the ransom demand, rather than try to find the bandits and rescue Felipe. For anybody from the rancho who started a battle that might result in Felipe's being killed would bring down the wrath of Don Esteban,

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who valued his son beyond any sum of money.

While that was going on and the ransom money was being gotten together and delivered, Puma figured to clear Buck Foster out of the cave and grab all the gold that was probably hidden there. It didn't matter to Puma now whether he killed Buck Foster or not. If he did kill Buck, there was still the chance of collecting ransom for Buck's carcass—for the Montana pards wouldn't know whether or not Buck was alive; presumably they would assume that he was alive and would no doubt pay the ransom money for the old puncher.

Jemez's dodge, in short, was aimed to give Puma more time.

Billy West and Joe Scott were considerably less gullible than Buck Foster. But Jemez's manner, his excitement, his empty holster and the excessive twitching of his eye muscles all suggested that he might be telling the truth. At least, there was no definite reason for them to doubt his word.

"We shoulda known better than to let Felipe go off with Buck," said Joe. "That old mossyhorn acts like a magnet for trouble. If there's any chance of a mix-up, he's sure to see it gets started."

Billy West glanced thoughtfully at the sinking sun. It would be twilight in an hour or so.

Joe asked: "Well, what do we do—take it lyin' down and pay the ransom or go take a look for those kidnapers?"

Billy West shook his head doubtfully. "If it was just Buck alone they'd captured, I'd say take a chance on shooting it out. But Felipe puts a different color on it. Kidnaping's one of the most vicious of all crimes, because the kidnapers have the ransom payers helpless. If you try to rescue the victim without paying the ransom, the kidnapers can—and usually will—kill the victim before anybody can kill the kidnapers."

"That's the way, all right." Joe nodded sourly.

West continued: "I don't think we have any right to take out after those kidnaper bandits. Suppose we did find 'em and get 'em cornered. The chances are they'd blast Felipe before we could blast them—and the old don wouldn't like that any. Some kidnapers just bluff about their intent to kill the victim, maybe—but most kidnapers mean it."

"Then, señores, we 'ad best return to the rancho pronto, eh?" Jemez put in swiftly. "The chief bandido—he wore the mask, as did hees men—say they weesh the ransom dinero before the dawn, or they weel keel the so-splendide Señores Felipe an' Buck Foster."

Billy West's face was grim. But he nodded slowly. "It sure rubs me the wrong way to do it, but I reckon the very least we should do is to talk it over with Don Esteban and see how he feels about it. Personally, I think he'll want to pay the ransom rather than take a chance on causing Felipe to die. Especially since I paid Don Esteban ten thousand dollars for those horses only a few days ago and he has the money handy."

"But what about Buck?" Joe asked. "We haven't any ten thousand dollars with us—not since you paid Don Esteban for the hosses—nor anywhere near it."

"I have less than a thousand cash," West replied. "Buck has something more than two thousand in that money belt of his—but the bandits likely'll count that as extra swag and not part of any ransom

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we might pay for his release."

"And," said Joe, "we can't very well try to shoot a way clear for Buck to escape, because he's with Felipe and we'd be riskin' Felipe's life. Mighty sour pickle."

"Yes," West agreed. He shrugged. "Well, maybe the kidnapers'll settle for what money we have. Certainly I couldn't get fresh money from Montana in less than a week. Got a few thousand in the bank there, but it might as well be in Africa for all the good it is now."

The Circle J boss gestured toward the rancho. He and Joe turned their horses southward toward the Spanish spread, with Jemez riding alongside—and much more relaxed inside, now that his treachery was paying off.

He was feeling good a little too soon, however.

For the trio had ridden but fifty yards or so toward the rancho when, from somewhere behind them, there was the somewhat muffled sound of three quick shots from a six-gun.

Billy West and Joe Scott reined in quickly, turned around to look, frowning.

"Gunshots," said Joe.

"I wonder how come," Billy West muttered.

"Eet ees some hunter, perhaps, amigos," Jemez said hastily—a little too hastily. "Eet can be nothing to delay us; for our mission, she ees *muy* urgent, señores!"

Billy West, face hard and grim, turned his attention to Jemez. The Montanan's gaze bored right into Jemez's eyes. The half-breed was breathing more heavily, and the muscles around his left eye were twitching much more rapidly.

"What makes you so sure it's just some hunter, hombre?" West asked in a hard, clipped tone.

"Eet mus' be a hunter!" Jemez said. "Who else?"

"That's what we want to know," West stated. He continued to stare hard right at the half-breed for a few moments—and Jemez's nervousness seemed to increase.

Here Joe Scott cut in: "I reckon we better take a look-see, boss, just so curiosity won't gnaw on us. Those shots sounded as if they weren't more'n a mile or so north of here—about where the head of that Conquistadore Canyon is supposed to be."

"Bot you weel waste the precious time, señores!" Jemez said, almost frantically.

"No so much," Joe drawled. "These palominos can run a mile in well under two minutes even in rough country like this. We can be back here again in mighty few minutes if it turns out to be just a hunter."

Jemez raised his arms, let them drop limply in resignation, and shrugged. "As you weesh, señores. I shall wait for you here, for my caballo already has run too much thees afternoon for the best eenterests of hees health."

"O. K. with us," West said. "You wait. We go."

The two Circle J pards whirled their gold-and-platinum mounts toward the north again; the two palominos were ready to run.

But the palominos had taken no more than three or four jumps when Jemez's right hand flashed inside his *charro* jacket and grasped a deadly little .41 hide-out derringer. Inasmuch as he couldn't talk them out of going into that canyon, Jemez was going to shoot them in the back and stop them once and for all. The half-breed knew that if he let the two salty Montanans get into that canyon and arroyo and put a crimp

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in Puma's plans—well, the outlaw leader would run Jemez down and kill him cold-bloodedly for botching the assignment.

But Billy West, who was a good hand at reading men's faces and emotions, had in the past several minutes developed a deep distrust of Jemez. The half-breed plainly didn't want him and Joe Scott to go into that canyon. There could be only one plausible reason for that: Jemez must be working with the kidnapers and all the stuff he'd been saying was a lie.

The Circle J boss sensed that Jemez might well try to backshoot them. So, holding the bridle reins in his left hand, West pulled his palomino to a sudden, unexpected stop. And as his left hand pulled the reins, West's right hand was flashing down for his six-gun.

Jemez got off the first shot; but the half-breed's hand was shaking with nervousness, and West's sudden stop also threw Jemez's aim off slightly.

The .41 slug burned sharply along West's left ribs—and then the Montanan's .45 was roaring. His first shot missed Jemez by a mere inch, but the second and third plowed heavily into the upper part of the half-breed's body. He released a muffled cry of pain and shock, slumped forward—and slowly slid out of the saddle onto the ground. He lay there limply, a crimsoning lifeless heap.

By this time Joe Scott, somewhat farther ahead, had whirled his mount around and was staring wide-eyed. "Holy H. Smoke! Good eye, boss!"

Billy West, eyes narrowed and muscles working angrily along his jaw, ejected the empty cartridges from his six-gun and put in fresh shells, clicking the mechanism shut savagely.

"I reckon," he said, "we'll find more than just some game hunters in that canyon of the conquistadores."

CHAPTER VI.

GUNS FOR THE GOLD.

PATIENCE was not one of Buck Foster's fine points. Each passing hour seemed like a week in that musty-smelling cave. Too, it wasn't pleasant sitting around with a skeleton sprawled out just behind him and with perhaps other gruesome things unseen in the dimness of the cave. Buck was slightly superstitious and wasn't too proud to believe in ghosts. He had no yen to explore the cave all by himself.

Besides, he had to keep an eye on that rock down there which protected the outlaw.

That outlaw must have a heap of patience. He couldn't possibly have slipped away, Buck reasoned.

It had occurred to Buck several hours earlier that the bandits undoubtedly had some plan cooking up to get him, and the thought didn't make the old puncher feel any calmer. Now, with one of 'em perched on top of the cliff to drop heavy stones on him, he couldn't even risk walking out of the cave for a six-gun showdown.

The waiting and not knowing what to expect were gnawing on Buck's nerves. It might be that the bandits were merely waiting for the night to fall and planning to sneak in and knock him off in the darkness. But, somehow, Buck suspected they might be working on some other plan.

It was about an hour short of twilight when Buck saw the hidden bandit chief's right arm raise up

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back of the rock, wigwagging to somebody evidently hidden back along the rim of the arroyo.

Buck fired three quick shots at the outlaw's arm, which hastily jerked back down out of sight. The old puncher couldn't tell whether any of his shots had hit the mark or not.

There was complete silence for a couple of minutes. Then, from a point that seemed to be a mile or so south of the cave, there came to Buck's ears the sound of three quick shots.

At first Buck figured they were queer echoes to be his own three shots. Next he decided two minutes would be a little slow for even the freakiest of echoes. Maybe it was somebody in trouble; three quick shots were accepted as a distress signal in most parts of the Western country.

Whatever the shots meant, Buck knew he had no chance of learning their meaning. He was stuck in this cave and some kind of unpleasantness was building up for his near future.

FARTHER down the arroyo, in the trees and bushes along its east bank, the bulky outlaw and the third outlaw—who were known simply as Heavy and Slim—were preparing the way for Buck's forthcoming unpleasantness.

Heavy had proceeded to the outlaw camp with the note, had given Jemez his orders. Then Heavy had gathered a cluster of a dozen fresh sticks of dynamite, wrapped them carefully with an old shirt and headed back to the canyon. Slim, after tying Felipe securely in the hidden camp, had also ridden back to the canyon as per orders. Slim arrived at the canyon only a minute or two later than Heavy, for Heavy had traveled back slowly, not wishing to risk having his fast-moving mount stumble and maybe knock off the dynamite.

Ordinarily, Puma would have ordered Slim to remain with Don Felipe and keep an eye on the Spanish youth. But Puma most of all wanted to explore that cave for the fortune in gold he had a strong hunch was hidden in the cave. If there was any large quantity of the heavy yellow metal, it might well take four horses—including Slim's horse—to pack it out. And Puma wanted to carry all the gold away at one time, as swiftly as possible, for he knew how dangerous it might be to dally in this canyon. Sooner or later a searching party from the rancho would be coming to look in this canyon. Maybe Jemez's story wouldn't fool them, or maybe even if the rancheros and the Montanans believed Jemez they would want to look through the canyon first.

So now, though Puma himself didn't care to risk leaving the shelter of his rock until after darkness had fallen or until Buck Foster had been blown out of action, Heavy and Slim were advancing to take care of Buck thoroughly.

Heavy had attached caps and fuses to the dynamite sticks before leaving the outlaws' camp. Now, as he and Slim crept silently through the trees and undergrowth toward the cave, each carried six sticks of the yellow explosive. They moved gingerly, well aware how tricky the stuff could be, especially if it were old or had been standing too long in one position so that the fluid nitroglycerin had run mostly to one spot in the stick. When that happened, a relatively light jarring action might explode a stick. This dynamite *looked* pretty new, but Heavy had stolen it several weeks

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ago from a mine storehouse, so he wasn't *sure* it was safe.

He certainly intended to be careful with it, in any case.

Blasting Buck Foster to pieces, or at least into unconsciousness, presented a problem in itself.

Puma's detailed note had told Heavy to bring a dozen or so sticks of dynamite along, just in case it should be needed. But, said Puma, just *one* well-aimed stick should do the job, suit of armor or no suit of armor. One stick exploding in an inclosed place such as the cave entrance should at least knock Buck Foster unconscious.

The outlaw chief had specially warned Heavy not to throw more than one stick at a time—for too strong a blast might well cave in the whole top of the entrance. If that should happen, it might take several days to dig the blasted-down rocks away so that they could enter the cave. And Puma didn't have days, nor even hours, to waste in needless digging.

Hence it was that Heavy, as he crept through the underbrush with quiet caution, perspired from nervousness. For Heavy was going to heave that single stick of dynamite which was to put Buck Foster out of the way to the fortune in gold.

It was a heavy responsibility. Heavy had been a fair baseball player in his youth, before he had turned to the owlhoot trails for a dangerous living. But he hadn't done much throwing in the past fifteen years. He knew how much depended upon the throwing of that first stick of dynamite. If he missed the cave entrance, the stick would blow up outside and merely warn old Foster of what he was up against—and Foster then could run far back into the cave, if it happened to be a long cave, and all the dynamite they could throw thereafter wouldn't hurt the old puncher. Especially if the cave happened to have a bend in it behind which Buck Foster could hide.

Heavy whispered: "I feel like one of them baseball-pitchin' hombres when it's the last innin' of the decidin' game with two strikes and three balls and everything dependin' upon the last pitch."

"First off," Slim reminded him, "we got to get into a position where we'll have a clear aim at the cave mouth—and we got to keep out of the old galoot's sight while we're doin' it."

"Yeah," said Heavy. "It ain't so easy to do."

"Nope. But we got to do it."

They continued to edge forward along the upper east rim of the arroyo. Within a few minutes they were no more than seventy or eighty feet from the cave opening. But they were off at an angle from it. Only a champion thrower could have lobbed a dynamite stick over those trees and bushes into that hole at such an angle. Heavy meditated.

"I guess," he said, "the best way would be to light the fuse up here, then jump down into the arroyo where I'll have a straight throw. I can throw it and duck back out of sight before the old galoot gets a chance to shoot at me."

"Seems to be the best way," Slim agreed in a whisper. "But maybe we ought to get a few feet closer."

"Yeah," said Heavy.

They got closer. Heavy, perspiring a little more freely, crouched behind a bushy young evergreen and pulled a sulphur match from his hatband. He placed five of his dynamite sticks carefully on the ground and held the sixth one in his right hand, transferring the match

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to his left hand. The fuse would burn for seven or eight seconds, allowing Heavy enough time to get down into the arroyo and make his throw and enough time for the stick to get to the cave mouth before it exploded.

Poised carefully for his slide down into the arroyo, Heavy reached his left hand out toward a small stone to strike the match and light the fuse.

BUT at that moment a powerful voice cut down from the top of the east rim of the canyon:

"Don't light that fuse, lobo!" It was Billy West.

Thoroughly startled, Heavy and

Slim both jerked their heads around and stared up at the unexpected interference.

The Circle J boss stood up there on the rim, six-gun in hand and pointing down at the two dynamiters. Billy West and Joe Scott had held a hasty conference and decided they could see things better from up on the canyon rim rather than down in the arroyo at the bottom of the canyon, where there were plenty of places for bushwhackers to lurk.

Joe Scott had gone up along the top of the western rim—opposite West, who was on the east rim—and now he shouted down from his side:

"Don't forget to count me in, gents!"

Something unexpected happened at that moment, however—something the two Circle J pards hadn't counted on.

Jake, the bandit who had been posted on top of the somewhat higher cliff over the cave entrance to drop stones on Buck, was still up there. Furthermore, Jake wore two six-guns—and he cut loose with both of them before the two Montanans were even aware of his existence.

In addition, Jake had the protection of a boulder. He crouched behind it with only his two guns and the top of his head visible.

Though Jake flung a couple of shots at Joe Scott, the fortified bandit concentrated mostly on Billy West.

Hot lead sang around the Circle J owner's head like hornets. He crouched down on one knee, flung a couple shots at Jake—but the bullets merely sang off the boulder as Jake ducked down out of sight. Billy West realized the grim seriousness of his own and Joe Scott's position. Not only were they outnumbered by the bandits four to two, they were also in a partial crossfire, with the most dangerous two-gun man forted up behind a boulder.

Slight beads of sweat stood out on the Circle J owner's brow. Jake snapped another shot at him that ripped a gash along West's right shoulder.

Joe suddenly shouted across: "Look out, boss! Comin' up!"

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Billy West shifted his glance to the left—and just in time!

Something yellowish and hissing and about a foot long was hurtling up at him end-over-end. In a flash he realized what it was. The heavy-set bandit had changed his mind about the target. Instead of heaving the dynamite stick into the cave, he had lighted the fuse and hurled the stick at West. It was well over a hundred feet from Heavy up to Billy West—quite a distance for any ordinary man. But Heavy was no ordinary man. He had a powerful arm.

The fuse had burned halfway down to the cap, only, for Heavy had thrown it the instant he lighted the fuse.

There was no time for Billy West to think it over. He acted by instinct. The stick was coming right at him. He flipped his six-gun into his left hand, reached out, caught the stick in his right hand.

All in the same motion, without a moment's pause, he wheeled and lobbed the sputtering stick high up into the air to the north.

The dynamite came down, hit the top of the boulder and skidded right down into Jake's face. At that instant it went off—and Jake parted company with himself, killed instantly by the blast.

JOE SCOTT had concentrated his fire on Jake's boulder while Billy West handled the dynamite. Now that Jake's remains were spread all over the top of the north cliff, the red-headed puncher turned his attention to a fresh menace—Puma.

The bandit chief had been just as surprised as his gunmen had been at the intrusion of the two Montanans. But Puma was never one to let surprise grip him for long. He had speedily flopped over, back against his protecting rock so that Buck Foster couldn't pour lead at him from the cave.

Puma and Joe blasted away at each other vigorously. They each hit the mark at the same instant—but Joe got merely a flesh wound in the thigh and Puma took one in the stomach. It doubled him up, coughing and kicking.

Meanwhile, Billy West, who was wearing but the one gun today, had flipped his .45 back into his right hand and was blazing a couple of shots at Heavy and Slim, who had swiftly switched to their six-guns after seeing how disastrously Billy West could make the dynamite back-

fire. Heavy and Slim had flopped down behind tree trunks for protection.

West had but two bullets remaining in his gun. He yelled down: "Lift your hands pronto and you'll live!"

Their answer to that was a fresh blast upward. One bullet hit Billy West high on the left arm and the other nicked his right ear.

"All right! You asked for it!"

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West muttered. He snapped a quick shot, aiming not at the two bandits but at the yellow sticks lying on the brown pine needles near them.

There was an immediate terrific explosion. The blast hurtled both bandits twelve or fifteen feet through the air, mutilating them so that they were scarcely recognizable. There was a big hole in the ground, and the nearby trees were stripped of twigs and foliage as though by a lightning bolt.

At that moment somebody who appeared to be either a ghost or a bandit appeared at the mouth of the cave and strode out brandishing a six-gun and yelling muffled, indistinguishable words, inside a suit of ancient armor.

"Another one, eh?" Joe Scott muttered. His red-headed temper was running high and his trigger finger was nervous. He didn't crave to waste time on palaver.

Instead, Joe swiftly lifted his gun, aimed it and emptied it right at the ghost in armor. *Bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong!* Just like that, for Joe had just reloaded his gun in the lull.

The gentleman in armor keeled over backward, struck the ground hard and lay still.

"Well, that takes care of him!" Joe muttered.

He and Billy West crouched low and scanned the canyon and arroyo intently for sign of any other enemy. But there was not so much as a hint of another. After a couple of minutes, Joe shouted across:

"You reckon that about does it, boss?"

"I reckon," West said.

"Where do you suppose Buck and Felipe are?"

"Likely tied up back in that cave somewhere," West guessed.

"We better go down and see, eh?"

"Yes."

They went down.

CHAPTER VII.

BANDIT BRIGHT-EYES.

THEY rode along the canyon's rim until they discovered steep game trails leading down. Within a couple of minutes they were together in the arroyo and riding up the slight incline through the broken tree limbs that blazed a palomino's previous trail to the cave.

They kept their six-guns up and ready as they went up the incline, for they weren't at all sure the bandit in the armor was dead.

He wasn't. He was just sitting up and shaking his head woozily. When the redhead's bullets had knocked him to the ground, the armored hombre had hit his head hard and it had knocked him out for a couple of minutes. His gun had fallen from his hand.

"Don't reach for that smoke pole, lobo!" Joe snarled. "There're chinks in every armor. Maybe that stuff was all right against swords three or four hundred years ago—but against a smart-aimed .45 it's not so hot."

There were muffled, angry words behind the helmet's face.

"Still tough, eh?" Joe snarled. "Lemme see if you're a ring-tailed bandit or the ghost of a conquistadore!"

The red-headed Circle J puncher strode forward, snapped off the visor clamp and pushed the movable visor upward.

Then, eyes bulging, Joe slapped left palm to his own forehead and reeled backward in horror that wasn't altogether pretended.

"*Holly H. Smoke!* It's you, mossyhorn!"

Buck Foster spluttered, gasped for

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air, his brown cowlike eyes full of mixed rage and anguish. He glared at Joe and roared hoarsely:

"Y-yas, yuh . . . yuh danged young whippersnapper! Yuh ain't got the brains of a loco skunk! Me a-hollerin' at yuh who I am, an' yuh right away try yore dangedest to salivate me! Whyn't yuh listen when—"

"And why don't you lift the visor when you want to yell out of a suit of armor?" Joe demanded. "Naturally, I figured it was one of those bandit hombres who craved more protection than his dead pards had."

"The dang clamp stuck on this hyar visor thing an' I couldn't get it up," Buck growled. "I near't suffocated."

"What's in the cave?" Billy West asked.

"Danged skeleton, a musty smell an' my hoss," Buck muttered.

"No gold?"

"Naw. Thet story was all a fake."

"You sure?"

"Waal, I was in thet cave four or five hours!" Buck stated indignantly. "I oughta know."

"Yes," West agreed, "you should. How'd you find it, by the way?"

Buck explained, cussing "thet loco palominner hoss" for getting him into such a fix.

"That loco hoss, as you call it, fixed it so you could save your life, maybe," the Circle J boss reminded him. "Let's have a look inside, Joe."

They found some pine pitch, made a torch and inspected the slate which had made the fake wall.

"Mighty neat piece of work," Billy West said. "I reckon those conquistadores were kinda exclusive to go to so much trouble in maintainin' their privacy."

Joe had stepped inside and was looking around with his torch. "This looks like an old underground river channel, which likely created the arroyo centuries ago, though flood water fallin' from the top of the cliff may have helped keep it in the shape of an arroyo. The tunnel narrows toward the back. Howdy, mister! How're things with you?" Joe was addressing the skeleton. The redhead flashed his torch around. "Just one of you gents, eh? What'd you do—come here to die all by your lonesome with—"

The red-headed puncher broke off abruptly, eyes bugging out while he stared at something sitting against the western wall of the cave. Joe vented a long, shrill whistle, mur-

mured "Holy smoke!" in an awed tone—and jerked out his six-gun and fired it once.

"Hey! Whut in thunder yuh doin' in thar?" Buck bawled.

"Gettin' overtime pay," Joe said hoarsely. "Just shot the lock off a long strong box sittin' against the wall."

"Whut!"

"Come in and see for yourself!"

Buck came, right behind Billy

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West. Buck's knees clanked together from wooziness. Then *his* eyes were bugging out too.

It was a treasure chest, certainly enough—one with a witch-hazel wand lying atop it. Buck's witch-hazel wand.

Joe wobbled forward, dropped to his knees and lifted the metal lid. He yelled: "Eeeeyippee! Gold! Get out the dice, gents!"

It *was* gold—quite a bit of it.

"Gold doubloons," Billy West said. "They're worth around sixteen dollars American apiece. And—"

"And there must be more'n a thousand coins in that box," said Joe. "Me, I don't need any whiskey. I'm drunk now."

"Plenty heavy," Billy West stated. "It'll take a buckboard and a couple strong mules to haul it out."

"It's supposed to be accursed," Joe recalled in mock fright.

"I reckon we can take a chance," Billy West smiled.

"Speakin' of chances," said Joe, glancing at his boss, "you got a couple wounds. Want to get blood poisonin'? You hightail back to the ranch. Buck can stay here to guard the doubloons. I'll take a pasear to find Felipe. I think that gut-shot gent down behind the rock is still alive. Maybe I can swap him a chance for his life in exchange for some information on Felipe."

"They took him somewhars," Buck announced.

Joe Scott laughed hollowly, put his hands on his hips and stared ironically at Buck.

"You win the mesh-bottom spittoon, mossyhorn," Joe drawled. "From now on you're Bright-eyes Foster, the wizard of wooziness. All afternoon prac'ly sittin' on a fortune—and then indignantly informin' us that the story about hidden gold was all a fake!"

Buck sputtered: "I was too b—"

"The best thing you can do," said Joe, "is crawl off in the weeds, hide your shameful face and keep quiet!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WAN WAND.

PUMA, who had this day made all the miscalculations lady luck ever allowed any one man, was sitting limply back against his rock and clutching his wounded stomach. He was only half-conscious.

The pards managed to bring him around enough so that he could understand what they were saying.

"We'll do our dangedest to save your no-account life if you'll tell us where young Don Felipe is," Joe told him. "At least we'll send a buckboard out from the ranch to pick you up and give you all the medical care there is at the ranch. How about it?"

Puma nodded weakly. "He . . . is in a deep sink which is . . . between two rock spires . . . about two miles . . . northwest of here."

"Fine. I guess I can find it, even if twilight is close to settlin' down," said Joe. "I'll run that palomino of mine two miles in five minutes, just to see if it's a stayer over a distance." Joe turned to Billy West. "You, boss—hightail it for the rancho and get those wounds fixed and some antiseptic in 'em—or we'll be usin' that gold to give you heap-fine funeral."

Billy West smiled, his face pale. "All right. I'll send a couple buckboards and some of the vaqueros out to pick up the gold and this black-eyed bandido. By the way—what's your name?"

Puma didn't answer. He had lapsed back into his coma.

"If the armor's too heavy, Bright-

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eyes," Joe suggested to Buck, "take it off and rest comfortable while you're guardin' the gold. And don't salt any down inside your boots on the sly."

"Go sit in a cactus," Buck growled. And to West: "Send me out a couple snorts o' redeye along with them buckboards. I figger I done earned me a drink."

Billy West and Joe mounted, departed on their separate missions.

AT midnight the four Montana pards were clustered around the main table in the dining room of the big Spanish-style ranchhouse of Don Esteban Vasora.

The old don and his son Felipe, together with the faithful Spanish vaqueros, were there too. Joe Scott had found Felipe tied up in the sink just as night fell. Aside from some stiffness imparted by the tight bonds, Felipe was in good shape. The gold and five assorted corpses had been hauled in less than an hour ago—Jemez, and what was left of Heavy, Slim, Jake and Puma. Puma had died on the way in, despite first-aid remedies which had been taken out to the cave to help him stay alive.

Don Esteban had just finished counting the doubloons which were stacked on the table. The total fell a few hundred dollars short of twenty thousand dollars.

"You are fortunate, amigos mio!" Don Esteban smiled.

"You, too," Billy West said.

"I? But certainly! My son is safe, thanks to your—"

"I mean," said West, "that half the gold is yours, too."

"But no!" Don Esteban protested. "It is not seemly that—"

"It was your map and your legend," said West. "Remember? Except for that, Don Felipe and Buck never would have started out."

"They are insistent, padre," said Don Felipe, smiling. "And it is most unwise to argue with the gentlemen from Montana. El Puma, one of the worst bandidos in all California, discovered that."

"One of the worst?" Joe Scott blinked in mock awe. "If I'd knowed *that* I'd have run like thunder away from there! Holy H. Smoke!"

"Waal, by ganny," Buck began, pointing to the witch-hazel wand which lay on the table by the gold, "I shore proved thet wand—"

Joe snatched up the wand, blinked at it, placed it reverently back on the table and bowed before it.

"True, indeed," said Joe with great solemnity. "And to think I never believed in those witch-hazel willows as gold finders!" The red-headed puncher turned to Buck and said: "Bright-eyes, you remember that Thanksgiving turkey that saved our lives over in New Mex a few months ago? We had it stuffed and sent up to Montana to mount over the fireplace."

"Yep. Whut about it?" Buck blinked.

"I reckon we'd better stuff this sprig of witch-razel, too, and send it up to take its place beside that turkey."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because," said Joe, "this witch-hazel wand has such powerful magic savvy and strength that when it smelled gold it pulled you and a hoss plumb through a stone wall in order to flop right down on top of the gold!"

Yes, the pards found gold—but gold doesn't always bring peace! Watch for the next salty Circle J adventure in Street & Smith's Wild West.

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That mysterious deputy set himself a mighty dangerous pastime when he bid in on that game of

TRIPLE TRIGGER

by CLAY STARR

POKEY CARSON rode into Tombstone on a fast-stepping bay horse, crossed Allen Street and continued to the jail on Toughnut Street where he tied up at the hitch rail.

In the saddle, his body had moved with rhythm and supple speed. It was only when Pokey Carson dismounted that the reason for his nickname became apparent. His left leg,

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It was showdown between the law, with boothill awaiting the loser.

inches shorter than the right, was stiff at the knee from an old bullet wound. Where he had received the wound, Carson had never explained.

Desert winds and sand storms had erased any signs of youth which might have given an indication of Pokey's age. Like many desert-bred men, he might have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty. His lean and wiry frame was hard bone and seasoned rawhide; with boots and rigging, his weight was a hundred and fifty pounds.

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Pokey Carson was a desert hawk with keen grayish eyes and a long thin nose, slightly curved where the butt of a gun had broken the wide bridge between his steady eyes.

A curious contradiction of a man, slow on his feet, double-fast from the waist up. The set of his wide shoulders was confident and prideful; the expression on his hard face made men hesitate.

Carson crossed the walk, pushed through the door to the sheriff's office, his right hand close to the gun on his leather-clad thigh. Relaxing as the door leading to the cell block swung inward, he nodded slightly at burly Max White.

"Morning, sheriff. You wanted to see me?"

Sheriff White nodded, stroking his clipped white mustache. One of his deputies had almost killed his mount getting out to Carson's horse ranch back in Skeleton Canyon, to hand the crippled man the badge of a special deputy sheriff.

POKEY CARSON knew the sheriff's need was urgent. He had refused to keep the deputy's badge, after asking for one a month after riding into Tombstone three years ago. After admitting that he was a gun swift, Carson had explained that he always stood ready to ride for the law on special cases. When Sheriff White sent the badge out to the Box C, Pokey Carson pinned it inside his worn vest, buckled a spare gun belt around his lean hips, and again became a temporary part of the law.

"I sent for you, Carson," Sheriff White answered slowly, measuring his words. "A killer rode in from New Mex last night after dark and killed a man."

"Yeah? There's you and your two deputies," Carson answered simply. "Three to one, and you send for me. How come?"

"I'll tell you how come," the sheriff answered, a flush staining his weathered features. "This gent rode in behind a deputy marshal's star, for which he had credentials. He got into a poker game with Curly Jack Stambough, accused Curly Jack of holding too many aces, and beat Curly to the draw."

"I suppose he claimed self-defense," Pokey Carson said quietly. "So you arrested him for discharging firearms within the city limits, huh? And the judge fined this law dog twenty-five bucks and costs?"

"Not this time," the sheriff contradicted. "You can't fine a lawman for burning powder in the discharge of his duty. This killer took five thousand in new currency from Curly Jack. Claimed it was part of the loot taken from a bank holdup over at Summit, New Mex."

Pokey Carson bunched the left side of his body up to hook his short leg on the rung of a chair. The move, offsetting his deformity, emphasized the balance and speed of his upper body.

"This special marshal," Pokey said quietly. "What's his handle?"

"Hammer Reed," the sheriff answered, his narrowed blue eyes watching Carson's hawkish face. "So called because he files the trigger dog on his gun and fans the hammer with his thumb. You ever hear of him?"

Pokey Carson closed his eyes and clenched his small hands. While his body was in Tombstone, the sheriff knew that Pokey Carson's thoughts were far away in some obscure place Carson never mentioned. He remained silent for so long that the sheriff finally repeated his question:

"You ever hear of this Hammer Reed?"

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"What's he look like?"

"Tall lanky jasper with pale-green eyes," the sheriff answered descriptively. "Wart on the left side of his nose, two fingers missing on his left hand. But he still wears a brace of cutters," he added as an afterthought.

"Never heard of him," Carson answered quietly, with a careless shrug. "Where can I find him?"

"Don't you make a pass for your gun, Pokey," the sheriff said quietly. "You're a liar by the clock."

Pokey Carson's right hand darted to his holster like a flashing beam of light, and his gray eyes changed color like smoke against desert sand. Thin lips made a gash in his hard face of mahogany tan; his whole body poised like a hawk about to strike.

"You know this Hammer Reed," Sheriff White whispered harshly. "Sorry, Carson, but I've got a hide-out gun in my pants pocket, and it is centered on your heart. Don't try to make smoke!"

POKEY CARSON stared at the sheriff with slow anger glowing in his smoky eyes. In a horse trade or a game of poker, he was known as a square shooter. The tautness left his body as his eyes cleared. Then he smiled crookedly, without mirth, admitting defeat.

"I know Hammer Reed, sheriff," he confessed, his voice a croaking whisper. A whisper that told of hate, frustration and something else that had made him older than his years. "Where did you say I could find him?" he asked, his voice once more normal.

"I didn't say," the sheriff answered tartly. "What's between you and this outside law dog?"

"Nothing," Carson answered grimly. "Nothing at all, sheriff. But about Curly Jack Stambough. Him and me were going to be pards in the Box C. We just got back from over in New Mex. Curly Jack had money in the bank at Summit; he drew five thousand to buy in with me."

"Yo're a liar," a drawling voice accused from the door.

Pokey Carson whirled like a cat, slapping for his right-hand gun. He almost fell as his crippled leg dipped to the floor; his hand falling away from his holster at the same time. A tall lanky man was standing in the doorway, spread-legged, a .45 six-shooter in his right hand.

Carson pushed his left leg behind him until space made both legs even. He spoke from between tightly clenched teeth, as he faced the gunman in the doorway.

"Holster up and draw me even, Hammer Reed. You've found me, after I stopped looking for you!"

"You go for your gun, I'll dehorn you," Reed threatened, as his left thumb turned out the lapel of his vest. "I've a warrant for your arrest, and I'm coming to take your hardware!"

"On what charge?" Sheriff White demanded sternly. "I'm rodding the law in these parts."

"I'm a United States deputy marshal with a roving commission, sheriff," Reed answered, his voice a dragging drawl reminiscent of south Texas. "This bandit helped hold up the Summit bank. Ask him if he didn't ride over to New Mex with his pard, Curly Jack Stambough?"

Sheriff White narrowed his eyes under white bristling brows. Pokey Carson was going to take a chance, was going to match his draw against the deputy marshal's drop.

"Don't do it, Carson," the sheriff said very softly. "Right or wrong, this gun-fanning law dog holds an ace in the hole!"

Pokey Carson relaxed with his head cocked to one side.

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"So do you, sheriff," he reminded quietly.

The lawman turned to Hammer Reed. "I'm the law here in Tombstone, Reed. You can't come in here and do my work, nor murder a man in my office. Holster that hogleg pronto. I've a hide-out gun in my pocket, and I can't miss you from where I stand!"

"Bluff," Reed sneered, but he lowered the muzzle of his gun. "I'm calling. Let's see the color of your ace!"

A wintry smile spread across the sheriff's rugged face. A bulge showed in his right pants pocket, into which his big hand was jammed.

"Don't swing your gun, or I'll blow you from under your hat," he warned Hammer Reed. "Coming out—with openers!"

His hand jerked from his pocket, clutching a murderous, two-shot .41 derringer. Hammer Reed, taking one look, holstered his black-butted gun.

"YOU win this hand, sheriff," he conceded grudgingly. "Now I demand the arrest of this bank robber."

"Now I demand to see your warrant," the sheriff retorted sharply.

"Do you need a warrant when you see a bank holdup?" Reed demanded. "I took right out after this pair."

"When I see a bank robbery," the sheriff answered dryly, "I don't have to chase the bandits. Aside from that, I don't exercise any authority outside my own county, and I never try to make an arrest across a State line!"

"You ain't a United States marshal," Reed growled. "I demand this man's arrest!"

"You're under arrest, Carson," the sheriff said slowly. "I'll have to hold you until Reed gets a warrant, but I release you on your promise not to leave town."

"That don't suit me," Reed argued hotly. "He goes behind bars without bail!"

"Not in Tombstone, he don't," the sheriff explained. "When a man wears a cutter in this town, he's serving notice that he can take care of himself. Most of our homicides are committed in self-defense, the penalty being a fine of twenty-five dollars for discharging firearms within the city limits."

"Mebbe you don't like our laws?" Pokey Carson said to Reed, his voice smooth as silk. "You passed me the lie when you sneaked through the door; I'm passing it right back to you. You didn't see Curly Jack and me robbing the Summit bank, you tinhorn. Get those hands up!"

Hammer Reed saw the trap too late. Listening intently to Carson, he was caught flat-footed as Carson streaked for his gun. The ugly muzzle spiked over Carson's holster lip and centered on Reed's chest with the hammer clicking back like the knell of doom.

"You can't pull off a holdup in Tombstone and get away with it," Carson continued softly. "You've got the five thousand you claim was stolen from the Summit bank. The sheriff will hold that dinero until he makes an investigation. Touch ceiling, or I'll tunnel your thieving heart!"

He advanced slowly on the raging deputy marshal, dragging his left leg in a peculiar step and a half. Jamming the muzzle of his gun against Reed's chest, Pokey Carson took his time as he reached to the inside pocket of Reed's vest. Pokey's smoky eyes dared the deputy marshal to crowd his luck.

Carson stepped away with a thick sheaf of currency in his left hand.

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He passed the money to the sheriff, lowered his hammer and holstered his gun with a twist of his supple wrist.

"Now?" he asked quietly. "You're a specail deputy marshal, I'm a special deputy sheriff. We don't like each other, or the way both of us deal out the law. You want to make something of it?"

Hammer Reed stared at Carson for a long moment without speaking. The deputy marshal weighed his chances. He had walked into the office of the Tombstone law, had been frisked like a common criminal. He was short five thousand dollars, and Pokey Carson was asking him if he wanted to make something of it.

Carson waited with both hands hooked in his shell-studded belts. He waited hopefully with the fighting blood singing through his veins that the death of his partner Curly Jack was to be avenged. Sheriff Max White stroked his mustache with his left hand, ready to dig for his law gun with his right. It was a three-way law puzzle with only one way out—

Hammer Reed took that one way when he shrugged his shoulders and turned away from Pokey Carson.

"I'll make something of it, but I'll do it legal," he announced tonelessly. "Like the sheriff ordered, don't you leave town."

"Like I'm telling you now, don't *you* leave town," Carson answered, with an irritating note of authority in his low voice. "As part of the law here in Tombstone, I want to make some investigations. Be seeing you around."

POKEY CARSON left the sheriff's office, mounted his horse and rode up to the Crystal Palace on Allen Street. Allen Street was the main drag, with boothill cemetery at the west end and the Bird Cage Opera House at the east, going out of town. The Crystal Palace Bar and Gambling Casino was in the middle of town.

Carson seldom walked because of his short leg. Once he had shot a saddle tramp in the leg, because the cowhand had whistled a tune in time to Carson's painful progress.

Carson rode around to the side door and ground-tied his horse with dragging reins. Sheriff Max White, who owned a piece of the Crystal Palace, tolerated no crooked wheels or stacked decks in the place.

The small, brown-eyed gambler who banked the roulette outfit nodded at Carson with a smile. He was Dude Evers—a little man with a big gun. He motioned Carson to a chair at a green-topped table, took another chair opposite. He began to riffle a deck of cards between his long white fingers, his lips barely moving as he talked in a low monotone.

"Curly Jack never had a chance, Carson. He was playing his cards above the table. Reed was drawing what he needed from a holdout card rigging. Curly won a pot of a thousand simoleons with four aces. Hammer Reed drew and drilled Curly from under the table, shot him twice in the belly without warning. I started to buy chips, but Reed flashed that deputy marshal's star, claiming Curly Jack was an owl-hooter with a thousand dollars on his scalp."

Pokey Carson listened, picked up the hand Dude Evers had dealt him, studied the cards closely. His hawkish face was a mask, except for the smoky gleam in his narrowed gray eyes. His voice was a thin whisper of sound as he murmured against his tight lips.

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"That was my money Curly and me drew from the bank at Summit. Curly was my half brother and was going to settle down with me on the Box C. Did I ever tell you I used to be a Texas Ranger, Dude?"

"You never talked, but I heard about it," the little gambler answered guardedly. "You was bushed by a gang of outlaws near Tascosa and killed three of them before you took a slug through the left knee."

"That's water over the dam," Carson said tonelessly, but his narrowed eyes betrayed a bitterness that would never grow less. "Only one of that gang got away, and he thought he had killed me. That killer's name is still wanted down Texas way."

"Better have a drink," Dude Evers suggested. "It will build you up where you're all tore down."

"I never touch the stuff myself," Carson muttered. "I'm heading out to the spread; I'll be back in three days. It ain't a secret."

Throwing his cards on the table, Pokey Carson pushed back his chair, dragged his left leg across the card room and mounted his horse. His tight lips were white as he cut back to Allen Street and rode through town with his back straight and his head high.

Four white horses swung out from a side street, black pampas plumes waving from their headstalls. They drew a big hearse with heavy plate-glass sides; a casket with silver handles was plainly visible inside the carriage.

Horsemen fell in behind the hearse as it rolled slowly up the grade to Tombstone's boothill. Pokey Carson gigged his horse with a blunted spur, passed the procession, took his place behind the hearse. His eyes glittered with anger as he saw Hammer Reed in the double line of riders.

It was an inviolate rule that horses were not allowed within the confines of the cemetery. Riders dismounted, tied their horses to the fence, uncovered their heads as the bearers carried the casket from the hearse.

Pokey Carson removed his black Stetson as he swung to the ground. A single rider attempted to urge his horse into the burial grounds—a two-gun man with greenish eyes and crossed gun belts strapped around his lean hips. Carson spoke briefly.

"Light down out of that saddle or ride back to town!"

Hammer Reed stared as Pokey Carson turned his back and walked to the open grave. Carson bobbed up and down each time he used his left leg, and he did not glance back.

Reed shrugged and slid from the saddle. He swaggered to the grave of the man he had killed, elbowed a place in the front ranks just opposite Pokey Carson. Carson glanced up, hell freezing in his gray eyes as he saw the cream-colored Stetson on the deputy marshal's head. A gun jumped to Carson's hand as he muttered a sharp command.

"Uncover out of respect for the dead!"

The preacher waited at the head of the grave, an open book in his two hands. He glanced at Reed.

"Remove your hat, brother!"

It was different when the sky pilot made a request; it furnished Reed with an excuse to save face. He smiled at the preacher, took off his hat, leaned over to read the inscription on the casket's silver plate and spoke loud enough for Pokey Carson to hear.

"An owlhooter can't beat the law!"

As Carson heard the sneering words, a tremble ran up his powerful arms. His fingers began to tingle,

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his palms ached to feel the kick of a bucking gun.

Carson closed his eyes, bowed his head. He remained that way through the brief service at the graveside. As the casket was lowered, he picked up a clod of earth, tossed it into the grave with a murmured farewell in Spanish:

"*Vaya con Dios.*"

"Go thou with God," the preacher repeated reverently, as he closed his Bible.

Pokey Carson left the graveyard first. He mounted his horse and galloped toward the foothills to find solitude. Solitude was the right word; Curly Jack had been his only kin.

POKEY CARSON rode into Tombstone three days after the funeral. Sheriff Max White was in his office with his spurred boots propped on his scarred oak desk. He nodded at Carson, pointed to a yellow envelope with his grizzled chin.

"Dude Evers rode over to Fairbanks this afternoon and got that wire," White told Carson. "Said it was for you. I'm not curious—but want me to read it for you?"

"I can read," Carson grunted, as he took the envelope and tore off one edge. After reading the brief message, he tucked it in a pocket of his vest, hitched up his crossed gun belts, turned his back on the sheriff and left the office.

"Talkative cuss," the sheriff grunted. "I'll just shag it up to the Crystal Palace. I do it anyhow before supper every day," he made an excuse for himself.

The sheriff walked through the front doors just as Pokey Carson hobbled through the side alley door to the card room.

Dude Evers, dealing stud poker to Hammer Reed, was winning the deputy marshal's money. As Evers got up for a new deck of cards, Pokey Carson took the gambler's chair facing Reed. Reed was the first to break the silence.

"So you come dragging it back to town just in time. Saves me the trouble of riding out to get you."

Sheriff White came through the arch from the bar, just in time to hear Reed's taunting remark. Dude Evers returned with the new cards; both men took the vacant chairs at the table. They didn't have long to wait for Carson's answer.

"Never mind cutting the cards, Reed. It's your deal. Let's say you've dealt the cards all around. Can anyone open?"

"Count me out," Dude Evers murmured softly. "My cards ain't high enough for this game of draw."

"I pass," Sheriff White said, and tapped the table with the fingers of his left hand.

"Check it to the dealer," Pokey Carson said, just above his breath. "It's your bet, Reed."

Hammer Reed made a great show with his left hand as he reached inside his vest. He drew out a stiff paper, opened it awkwardly, laid it face down on the table.

"Warrant for your arrest, Carson. I just got it in the mail from New Mex."

Pokey Carson had both hands hooked in his belts as he leaned forward to scan the document. It was a warrant for the arrest of one Pokey Carson, charged with robbing the bank at Summit, New Mexico. It appeared legal enough, but Pokey Carson shook his head.

"You're drawing from an inside straight, Reed," Carson said quietly.

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"It takes five days for the mail to get here from Summit."

"Just a minute," Sheriff Max White interrupted. "I rode over to the railroad at Fairbanks and sent a wire to the sheriff at Summit. Hammer Reed is a United States deputy marshal all right—but the bank at Summit wasn't robbed!"

Hammer Reed leaned back, watching Pokey Carson's every move. Carson came to his feet, reached inside his vest, brought out a little book which he laid on the table at a marked page.

"That's the "*Wanted*" book of the names of outlaws given to every Texas Ranger," Carson explained quietly. "It contains the name of Jonathon, alias Hammer Reed. That beats your hand, Mister Deputy Marshal!"

Hammer Reed stared at the book, raised his greenish eyes to Carson's hard face. Now the deputy marshal's eyes were changing to a reddish gleam, glowing with killer light.

Hammer Reed stabbed suddenly at the gun holstered on his long right leg. It was showdown between the law, with a grave waiting up in boothill for the loser.

Pokey Carson shed his pokiness like a snake sheds its skin. Both hands jerked forward, skinning the holsters from his twin guns. A terrific triple explosion blasted the quiet of the card room as three heavy guns roared under the green-topped table.

Acrid powder smoke curled up to hide the two gun fighters for a brief time. Then, as the smoke cleared away in the draft from the open side door, Hammer Reed dropped his smoking pistol, clutching at his belly.

Pokey Carson stood there, a fine figure of a man. His guns were back in their scabbards; a grim smile curled the corners of his lips.

"That's the way you got Curly Jack, Reed," Carson said quietly. "You forgot that when a man's body slows up in one place, it gets faster in some other spot. You forgot that murder is never outlawed!"

Hammer Reed swayed and slid from his chair. No one put out a hand to break his fall. After the deputy marshal's boots had stopped rattling, Sheriff White turned to his special deputy.

"He got you, Carson. You hit bad?"

"Naw," Pokey Carson lied brazenly. "His slug nicked my left knee again, just as he did seven years ago. Now I can have it doctored up right and mebbeso walk like a man again."

"You said the law never outlawed murder," Dude Evers said calmly. "You never swore out a murder warrant against Reed for killing your brother."

"One murder or another, what's the difference," Carson said with a shrug. "Before I got shot up and crippled, folks used to call me Charley Stambough. Reed was wanted for murder, and I can prove it by this wire I had sent in your name. Read it out loud, Dude."

Dude Evers took the yellow paper Carson handed him. He read slowly, in a clear low voice:

"Jonathon, alias Hammer Reed, is wanted for the murder of Texas Ranger Charles Stamboug. One-thousand-dollar reward, dead or alive."

"Send that reward money to the Rangers relief fund, sheriff," Carson said through stiff lips. "I've got to see a doc about this bum knee. And listen, sheriff. Charley Stambough is legally dead. Any mail comes for me while I'm in the hospital, just send it to Pokey Carson. Here's your special deputy sheriff's badge!"

THE END.

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Sentz was seated at the table, idly playing solitaire while he waited to trap Phelps.

GHOST OF THE BORDER EAGLE

by PHILIP F. DEERE

Vengeance on that bushwhacking ex-owlhooter would be swift and sure—the only trouble being that it had to be bought with the corpse of Trig Trenton!

CHAPTER I.

DEATH ON THE R. F. D.

HANK SENTZ was going to murder a man he had never seen, a man whose name—Pony Bob Paladine—he had learned only the day before over at the post office at Caprock.

Squatting in the mesquites which choked the mouth of a shale-walled barranca, Sentz cursed the heat and the flies and the delay in Paladine's arrival and killed time by smoking

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innumerable quirlies, lighting one butt from another.

Since daylight he had kept his lone vigil here, a .30-30 carbine at his side. Dozens of times the rancher had taken his twin Colts out of holsters, testing the cylinders with nervous impatience.

The main stagecoach road over the Sunblaze divide into Suicide Valley passed within fifty yards of the draw where Sentz had stationed himself. His hide-out overlooked the intersection of another wagon road which snaked off toward the south, where Suicide Valley tapered into a bottle neck of cliffs at the Mexico boundary line.

A mailbox was nailed to a post where the side road met the route over the pass. The legend painted on the mailbox had decided Hank Sentz to waylay Pony Bob Paladine at this spot:

TNT RANCH—TRIGGER TRENTON, OWNER

Ten miles to the south, Sentz could see the whitewashed walls and red tile roofs of Trenton's Spanish-style hacienda buildings. He was remembering that the TNT boss had a nickname more famous throughout Arizona Territory than his real one—the Border Eagle.

A decade before—when Hank Sentz had been a roving saddle bum engaged in border-hopping pursuits, instead of the owner of a prosperous cattle ranch east of the mountains—the Border Eagle had been the most celebrated United States marshal along the border.

The loot of a daring stagecoach robbery had netted Hank Sentz the dinero with which he had founded the Rafter S outfit, beyond the Sunblaze foothills to the east. At about the same time that Sentz had quit the owlhoot trail to become a range baron, the Border Eagle had hung up his guns and his star to become a cattleman likewise. His vast TNT holdings virtually covered the expanse of Suicide Valley.

But Hank Sentz's outlaw past was catching up with him. Today—unless an ambush bullet prevented it—Trig Trenton was going to receive a package in the mail which, if he interpreted it properly, would send the Border Eagle out on a man hunt again. A man hunt that could easily wind up with a hang noose around Hank Sentz's bull-thick neck.

The drum of hoofbeats sounded on the sultry air, and Hank Sentz tossed aside his fresh-tapered brownie cigarette with an oath. Hunkering down on one knee, Sentz levered a cartridge into the breech of his carbine and peered anxiously through the screening mesquites. Sentz's pale-green eyes narrowed murderously as he watched a lone horseman top a rise from the direction of the mountain pass and jog down the stage road.

Even from a distance, Sentz knew the rider was an R. F. D. mail carrier. Pony Bob Paladine serviced the string of rural boxes out of the Caprock post office, and Trenton's spread was the western end of his route.

An ageless veteran of the Pony Express, Paladine sat his kak like a gaunt scarecrow, his scraggly beard blowing over one shoulder. Heavy mail pouches, similar to the bags he had once carried on the Overland Mail more than a generation ago, were strapped to the pommel and cantle of Paladine's saddle.

This time yesterday, Hank Sentz had been brooding in a Caprock saloon, debating whether to hold up the cow-town post office and seize the all-important package which had

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been mailed to the Border Eagle from an inmate of the penitentiary in Yuma. Another convict, who had sided Hank Sentz in the old days, had managed to tip him off concerning the nature of that package.

The odds against being able to locate the parcel in the Caprock post office had made the Circle S rancher decide on a less risky way to intercept the Eagle's mail. He would waylay whatever R. F. D. carrier handled the Suicide Valley route.

Paladine was that man. There was something ironic in the way Paladine had been destined to play out his string—a victim of cowardly ambush. It would be an inglorious finish for a veteran plainsman who had had countless brushes with death in the form of Indian warriors and road agents, blizzards and stampeding buffalo.

"It's a cinch," Sentz muttered. "He won't even know what hit him."

THE rancher's nerves were steady as brass as he waited for Paladine to rein up at the TNT mailbox. Unsnapping an *alforja* flap, the ancient mailman leaned from stirrup to thrust a handful of letters and newspapers into the box.

Sentz was squinting down the barrel of his Winchester as Paladine twisted around in saddle to untie a flat, rectangular package wrapped in butcher's paper from the bundle behind his cantle. Lifting the package, Pony Bob Paladine was masking his view of the nearby gulch when the flat crack of Sentz's shot sent echoes chasing across the heat-shimmering expanse of sageland. A steel-jacketed bullet plucked a slot through the paper-wrapped package and drilled home in the mailman's ribs. Knocked out of saddle by the impact of the bullet, Paladine hit the TNT mailbox and then crumpled in the weeds.

Leaving his smoking rifle in the mesquite growth, Hank Sentz came into the open and raced down the gentle slope. The mail carrier's pony galloped off up the stage road in panic, stirrup leathers flapping, envelopes spilling from the opened pouch.

Blood was spurting from the bullet hole in Paladine's shirt as Sentz skidded to a halt before the mailbox. Crimson had splashed over the rectangular package the mail carrier had been in the act of hanging on a nail under the mailbox.

A gaunt figure in batwing chaps and stilt-heeled Coffeyvilles, Sentz rolled Paladine's body to one side with a boot heel, his rope-calloused hands trembling as he jerked open the metal door of Trenton's mailbox and pawed out the ranch mail.

A grin spread Sentz's bloodless lips as he found the envelope he was looking for. Postmarked at Yuma, Arizona, its return address was one which struck terror to the outlaw's heart:

Inmate 7117, Territorial Prison,
Yuma, Arizona

"That's Bill Phelps' handwritin'," the ambusher told himself, feverishly ripping open the envelope. "Ed Wickburg guessed right when he told me what Phelps was doin'."

The color drained from Hank Sentz's blue-jowled face as he read the convict's message to Trigger Trenton:

DEAR BORDER EAGLE:

You remember when the Wells Fargo stagecoach was held up, its crew massacred and its strong box stolen over in Gunhammer Pass a few years ago? Four bandits did that job, and you trailed them to Gila Bend. You shot the Pacheco Kid and landed me and a buskie named Ed Wick-

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burg in Yuma to serve ten-year stretches. But the ringleader got away—and you never knew it.

Wickburg and me kept quiet about it, thinking the ringleader would get us out of the Gila Bend jailhouse after our trial was over. But he never made any effort in our behalf, and by the time I landed behind bars it was too late to make anybody believe we had been double-crossed by our boss.

I wasn't really a criminal, in spite of the fact I ran with owlhooters, Trenton. I was a salty young kid from New York, a dude who was hunting adventure and got mixed up with the wrong crowd when I came West. All I had to do with that Gunhammer Pass robbery was to hold the horses for the others.

Of course, that doesn't excuse my crime. I took my dose of Yuma medicine without complaint. And in a week or so I'm to be released, along with Ed Wickburg.

My lungs are shot, Trenton. When I get out I'm going up in the mountains where it's high and dry, to play out what's left of my string. I'm not equal to tracking down the ringleader who double-crossed us. I don't think I'm even equal to making the ride over to your ranch to talk to you in person. I may be dead when you get this.

But I am sending you a package by parcel post, Trenton. When you get it, you'll see who our ringleader was—an hombre whose name I never knew. We just called him the Boss. Ed Wickburg knows I'm sending this package, and it's possible he may tip off the Boss—I think they're still in touch with each other. So guard what I'm mailing you with care, and watch out for an attempt on your life.

I want to do what I can to clear my name and maybe help you bring that double crosser to justice. Remember, he got away with the loot of that stagecoach robbery.

Yours truly,

BILL PHELPS.

Hank Sentz was oozing perspiration, and a cold fear was in his eyes by the time he had finished 7117's message.

A DRUMMING of hoofbeats interrupted the killer while he was touching a match to Phelps' letter and envelope. Letting the blazing paper drop to the ground, Sentz whirled about to stare across the mailbox toward the south.

A rider was coming up fast, by way of the TNT road—a rider in coffee-brown Stetson, green shirt and chocolate-colored chaps.

"The Border Eagle!"

Panic shot through Hank Sentz, as he realized that his murder of Pony Bob Paladine might have been witnessed by the rancher who was coming out to get his mail—even though an intervening ridge had hidden Trig Trenton from view during Sentz's impatient vigil.

With a final glance at the dead mail carrier, Sentz turned and snatched up the rectangular package which bore Trenton's address. Even as he headed for the nearby gulch, the ambusher heard the TNT rancher's angry yell:

"Stand hitched, you blasted mail robber!"

Sentz redoubled his speed, only to hear the crash of a gunshot, and feel a .45 slug graze his Stetson. Another shot ripped through the package Sentz was carrying under his left arm, knocking it out of his grasp.

Whipping a glance behind him, Sentz saw Trig Trenton spurring hard as he passed Pony Bob Paladine's corpse huddled by the mailbox. Trenton's .45s were roaring, and Sentz knew that his only alternative to flight lay in shooting it out with the gun ace who was hammering up the slope after him.

There was no time to snatch up Bill Phelps' parcel. To do so would have been to invite death, caught in the open before the Border Eagle's guns. With a squall of terror, the Rafter S rancher plunged into the barranca chaparral. Snatching up his .30-30 Sentz triggered once. Through pluming gun smoke, he saw Trig Trenton's bay pony go down in midstride, a Winchester slug tunneling its brisket.

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New hope surged through Hank Sentz as he saw the Eagle kick out of stirrups and catapult headlong over the crumpling carcass of his mount.

Trenton hit the dust and rolled like a dead man. With a cold laugh, Sentz ejected the spent shell and knelt on one knee. A bullet through Trenton's brain would make Sentz's future secure as nothing else would. Drawing a slow bead on the lawman's motionless figure, Hank Sentz squeezed trigger.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER MASTERPIECE.

THE bullet was close—so close it kicked gravel into Trig Trenton's face as he lay sprawled on the alkali in easy range of the ambusher's rifle. He owed his life to the fact that the hidden gunman's nerves were shaky, plus the fact that the westering sun was in the killer's eyes.

Half stunned, the Border Eagle bounced to his feet and picked up the six-guns he had dropped at the moment he struck the ground.

A second bullet whined past his ear from the mouth of the barranca, as Trenton vaulted the slain carcass of his cow pony and dove to shelter behind the horse's shielding bulk. Jabbing .45s into basket-woven holsters, the Border Eagle snaked his own carbine from its saddle boot, and triggered a slug into the screening chaparral which hid his attacker.

A yell of agony rewarded his blind shot, and then he heard the brush crackling as the rifle toter, wounded or panic-stricken, retreated deeper up the draw.

His senses clearing rapidly, Trenton realized that to remain sprawled behind the scanty shelter of the dead pony would be to invite disaster. If his unknown assailant climbed the ridge, it would be a simple matter to pick Trenton off from the higher elevation.

Springing to his feet, Trenton headed in a beeline for the brushy ravine, crouched low, thumb ready on gun hammer.

Inside the mouth of the draw, the Border Eagle paused to stare at a litter of half-smoked cigarette butts lying on the ground. Then he caught sight of drops of fresh blood staining the sand, where the outlaw who had felt the sting of his lead had beat a retreat.

Then steel-shod roofs hammered the adobe somewhere up the crooked barranca, and the Border Eagle got a fleeting glimpse of his opponent topping the skyline, mounted on a dun mustang. A moment later the outlaw was gone, spurring hard and leaving only a smudge of yellow dust in the air.

TEN minutes later Trenton had worked his way to the crest of the hogback; but the murderer of the RFD carrier was a remote dot in the distance now, spurring hard in the direction of the Sunblaze Pass. He had been too far away for Trenton to recognize.

"Reckon I can be thankful I wasn't forkin' Fleetfoot this mornin'," Trenton muttered, cuffing back his Stetson and swabbing perspiration from his forehead. "If anything had happened to that pet cayuse o' mine, I reckon I'd track down that buscadero on foot."

Face scowling, the Border Eagle headed back down the hillside. A lean, hard-bitten young waddy in his early thirties, agate-eyed and brown-haired, Trig Trenton was no stranger to ambush attacks. But in this case, he realized that pure acci-

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dent that had made him a near witness to a mail robbery.

"Bob Paladine was supposed to bring me a registered parcel containin' beef dinero from the Caprock Bank," Trenton mused, as he focused his gaze on the huddled corpse of the Pony Express veteran. "That musta been what that dry-gulcher was after. It ain't often an RFD rider would be carryin' any mail worth an ambusher's while."

Midway down the slope from the ravine mouth to his slain peg pony, the Eagle stooped to pick up the brown paper-wrapped parcel which the mail robber had been carrying at the moment of his getaway.

On his way down to the road, Trenton scanned the package curiously. It was light—less than two pounds—measured roughly two feet square and had been addressed to him. He gave no thought at the moment to the return address in the upper left-hand corner of the package:

From Inmate No. 7117,
Territorial Penitentiary,
Yuma, Arizona

Trenton brushed aside his curiosity regarding a package that had come from a convict behind Yuma's walls, setting the parcel to one side as he knelt beside Pony Bob Paladine's body.

A brief glance at the mail carrier revealed that Paladine had died instantly from a bullet in the heart.

"Poor ol' Bob," muttered the Eagle. "My conscience'll hurt for a long time to come if it turns out he was killed bringin' me some registered mail."

Letters and newspapers were scattered about the ground beside the mailbox, addressed to Trenton or members of his TNT crew. A grin lighted the cowboy's face as he saw one missive which bore the printed return address of the Stockman's Bank in Caprock.

Ripping it open, Trenton drew out a cashier's check covering the proceeds of a sale of prime beef from the TNT Ranch. Since the check was cashable only when it bore Trenton's signature, the bank had not registered the letter.

"At least that robber didn't have time to get his loot," Trenton thought. "Somebody musta tipped him off that Paladine was bringin' me some dinero, and he thought it would be cash—"

Trenton broke off as he noted the litter of ashes underfoot. Stooping, he found one corner of an envelope which the fire had not completely consumed. It bore a portion of an address which he recognized as his own:

—uicide Valley, Arizona.

"What in thunder?" mused the TNT boss, fingering the burned paper. "That buscadero intercepted a letter o' some sort, that was addressed to my spread, an' was burnin' it up when I rode up, it looks like. I remember seein' him settin' somethin' afire—"

Here was a mystery which seemed to point to another motive for Paladine's bushwhack murder. Was it possible that the unknown killer had not been attempting to get the bank's check after all?

"He was tryin' to steal this here package o' mine, when my slug knocked it out o' his hands," Trenton reasoned, picking up the parcel. "Either he thought it contained somethin' of value, or else it ties in with his reason for waylayin' Pony Bob—"

Ripping the paper off the bullet-punctured package, the Border Eagle was not prepared for what the parcel contained.

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IT was a two-foot square of canvas, tacked to a light wooden frame. Turning it over, Trenton gaped in amazement as he saw that the object was an oil painting.

The painting depicted a stagecoach robbery, and it was done by an artist who was a master of his brush. Though he was no art critic, Trig Trenton did know his Western scenery and his horses. And the convict who had painted this scene had been an artist of no mean ability.

The picture had been done with meticulous care and attention to detail. It showed a red-and-yellow Wells Fargo stagecoach, halted on the hairpin bend of a mountain road, against a background of snow-wigged peaks. The scenery had an almost uncanny realism. The six Morgans drawing the Concord were depicted in lifelike attitudes of panic, rearing in their traces, eyes rolling with terror. A white-whiskered driver was clutching the ribbons with one fist, while his other hand was clutching a bullet wound in his stomach. At the jehu's side was a shotgun guard, half standing up, his arms thrown upward in a posture of agony, blood gushing from a bullet hole in his forehead. The frightened face of a lone passenger was peering from a canvas-curtained window of the Concord. And in the foreground, crouched in a nest of volcanic boulders, were two holdup men, smoke pouring from their rifles.

"Why—danged if this isn't the holdup of the last stage that ever went over Gunhammer Pass, eight or ten years ago!" cried the Border Eagle, as he recognized the locale of the picture, as positively as if he had been looking at an action photograph of the holdup which had gone down in the annals of Arizona crime as one of the Territory's most cold-blooded massacres. "That driver is old Grandpa Russel, and the shotgun guard was named Rushlight—"

The painting bore no title, but none was necessary. All too vividly, the Border Eagle recalled having visited the scene of the original robbery, back in the days when he had been an active lawman.

Trenton had been trailing a quartet of outlaws into the Sunblaze Mountains when the Wells Fargo stage had been robbed at the summit of Gunhammer Pass. The Eagle had reached the stalled Concord not ten minutes after the owlhooters had vamoosed, taking a strong box containing a fortune in gold dust, and leaving behind three dead men: the tooler, his guard and the lone passenger.

In a Gila Bend saloon, weeks later, the fugitives had faced Trenton in a hot-lead showdown. Out of that shoot-out at four-to-one odds, Trenton had emerged more dead than alive—but with two prisoners.

The Pacheco Kid had died in the initial outburst of shots; the ringleader had escaped into the night. Bill Phelps and Ed Wickburg—the former a whiskerless stripling, then—had their trial and received sentences to Yuma. They had laid the blame for the actual murders upon their vanished leader and the Pacheco Kid.

The loot had never been found, and Trig Trenton had half forgotten the case. But now, out of a murky past, a Yuma convict had mailed him a murder masterpiece, to revive the circumstances of that long-past Wells Fargo massacre.

The artist's signature was in one corner of the painting: Bill Phelps, No. 7117, Yuma Pen.

Tearing his attention from the painted likenesses of Grandpa Russel and the shotgun guard, Rushlight, the Border Eagle bent closer to

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study the faces of the outlaw pair bellied down in the rocks. Neither wore masks. One of them was Ed Wickburg, beyond doubt. Phelps' memory had retained an indelible fund of details.

The second outlaw—his face outlined in bold strokes, with the sun streaming down upon it—was not the face of Bill Phelps nor of the Pacheco Kid who had died in gun smoke over in Gila Bend so long ago.

It was a square, inflexible face blue-jowled and beetle-browed, with a crooked shovel nose, a gashlike mouth and a pair of gooseberry eyes which the artist, with something approaching genius, had succeeded in suffusing with a bestial glint such as the Border Eagle had seen more than once in the look of case-hardened gun slicks.

The outlaw's portrait was the focal point of interest in the oil painting. Through the wizardry of composition and the play of light and shadow on the scene, Bill Phelps had succeeded in making the face of the green-eyed outlaw so outstanding that it drew an onlooker's eye away from the beauty of the mountain scenery or the dramatic action of the stagecoach itself.

"I've seen that face before, somewhere—sometime," Trig Trenton mused. "But danged if I can recall where."

CHAPTER III.

WORD FROM YUMA.

TRENTON got his coiled rope from the saddle strapped to his slain mount and walked across the sage flats to where Pony Bob Paladine's mail-toting horse was grazing.

A deft throw of the lariat sent the noose about the pony's upflung head, and a few moments later the Eagle was tying the mail carrier's corpse astride the cantle.

A norther was kicking up a sandstorm in the Sunblaze foothills as Trenton headed off toward the TNT spread, and sight of the dust smudging up to obscure the sun brought a sardonic grin to the waddy's lips.

"That storm'll scour the ridges an' wipe out the last trace o' that bushwhacker's getaway trail," Trenton thought regretfully. "I reckon I'll never be able to find out what lay behind this here killin' an' mail robbery."

Ten miles across the rolling floor of Suicide Valley, on high-heeled kangaroo cow boots, was an ordeal which the Border Eagle steeled himself to endure. For Trenton knew that Paladine's horse, already ganted from its trek out of Caprock, could not carry a double load.

Carrying Bill Phelps' oil painting under one arm, Trenton did plenty of thinking as he plodded the weary miles, leading Paladine's horse with its grisly burden.

A hunch kept buzzing its rattles in the back of Trenton's brain to the effect that Bill Philps, the youthful desperado he had sent to Yuma Penitentiary years before, had had some vital reason for mailing him the oil painting which he had worked on during spare hours in his prison cell.

"Phelps wouldn't try to do me a favor," the Eagle told himself. "He prob'ly hates my guts. An' that paintin' is worth money. Any saloonkeeper would be glad to pay him cash dinero for it, to hang up in a barroom."

The more he pondered the mystery, the more Trenton came to believe that Pony Bob Paladine's murder had been committed with the idea of keeping Phelps' masterpiece from reaching its consignee. On the other hand, perhaps it had been the letter—which the outlaw had taken the pains to burn—which had pro-

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vided the motive for the slaying; maybe the robbery of the paper-wrapped bundle had been incidental.

The TNT Ranch was obscured in a mist of flying sand by the time the Border Eagle reached his home spread. Hitching Paladine's horse in front of the bunkhouse, the Border Eagle entered the building and interrupted a poker game being played by several TNT cowhands who were seeking shelter from the sand storm.

"I got a dead man outside, boys," Trenton announced grimly. "Old Pony Bob, the mail carrier."

He described the circumstances of Paladine's murder briefly, his recital bringing angry oaths from the TNT crew. Old Pony Bob had been a prime favorite along the border for more than thirty years, and knowledge that his killer had escaped brought vengeful lights into the eyes of Trenton's listeners.

"Pete," concluded the ranch boss, singling out his roustabout, "when this storm blows itself out, I want you to hitch up a wagon an' take Pony Bob over the divide to Caprock. Turn him over to the county coroner."

It was almost sundown before the sand storm was over and Pony Bob Paladine's corpse, covered with a canvas tarp, was loaded aboard a spring wagon for his last trip back along the RFD route.

"Here's a letter I want you to mail for me, Pete," Trenton told his roustabout. "See that it gets off sure, savvy? I don't want you fishin' the letter out o' your jumper pocket a couple weeks from now."

The letter was addressed to Bill Phelps at the Yuma Penitentiary, and it was an unusual message for a lawman to be sending to man he had sent over the road:

DEAR PHELPS:

Many thanks for the painting. You have a real career cut out for yourself after your term has been served. Such talent should take you a long ways.

The mail carrier who delivered it was shot and killed by a bushwhacker, who tried to make off with the package. In view of the mysterious circumstances surrounding the mailman's death, I'm wondering if you had a motive for sending that picture which I haven't figured out? If so, I'd be obliged if you'd write me concerning it.

If my memory serves me O. K., you're about due to leave Yuma. If there is anything I can do to help you get started again, don't hesitate to let me know, or visit my ranch in person.

Best of luck,
TRIG TRENTON.

The convict's painting, adequately framed, was hung over the mantel of the Eagle's fireplace in the main ranchhouse.

IN the days which followed the routine of range work occupied Trenton's attention, and gradually the mysterious slaying of Pony Bob Paladine was crowded into the background of his thoughts.

Two weeks later, however, he rode out to the mailbox to find his letter to Bill Phelps returned unopened. Accompanying it was a message from his friend the warden:

DEAR TRIG:

The penitentiary mail clerk has called my attention to the fact that you recently wrote to one of our inmates, Number 7117, named William Phelps.

This is to advise you that Phelps was released on September 9th, the day before your letter arrived, and he left no forwarding address.

Phelps was suffering from an advanced case of T. B., and from what I gather from his cellmate, Ed Wickburg, he plans to camp out in the Sunblazes in an attempt to restore his health with outdoor living.

Phelps was a model prisoner and devoted much of his time to painting and sculpture, in which arts he demonstrated a marked talent. Best wishes always, JIM.

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Shrugging thoughtfully, Trenton tore his letter to Bill Phelps into bits and reined Fleetfoot, his favorite mustang, back toward the home ranch.

"I reckon Paladine's murder is a closed case," he mused. "If I could only place that bandit's face in his painting—I know I've seen that face before."

Another month had elapsed before the convict's masterpiece once more came into the forefront of the Border Eagle's attention.

It was on a visit to Les Wilson, a deputy sheriff who had come to the TNT spread to collect the fall taxes. Seated before a crackling fire, the tin star was building a brown-paper cigarette and staring up at Phelps' picture hanging over the mantel.

"Whoever done that paintin' for you, Trig, had a strange sense o' humor." Wilson chuckled. "Has Hank Sentz ever seed that picture of himself?"

Trenton scanned the painting of the stagecoach holdup and scowled.

"Hank Sentz? You mean the owner o' the Rafter S spread on the other side of the mountains?"

The deputy grinned, scratching a match on his boot sole.

"Nobody else. Sentz musta been one o' the models that artist hombre used when he painted that pitcher, Trig. It's a dead spittin' image of old Hank."

Trenton was conscious of a pulse racing in his throat. He stared from the deputy to the picture and back to Wilson again.

"Meanin' what, Les?" he demanded sharply.

Wilson got to his feet and tapped the oil painting with a finger.

"This bandit here, bellyin' down in the rocks an' pourin' lead at the stagecoach crew," he said, chuckling. "The artist has made this bushwhacker look like Hank Sentz. Ain't you ever noticed the likeness?"

A strange light kindled in Trenton's agate-brown eyes.

"Wilson," he exclaimed jubilantly, "that hombre's face has been botherin' me ever since an amigo o' mine sent me that painting! *Sure, it's Hank Sentz*—it couldn't be nobody else!"

Trenton rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, his gaze burning up at the convict's masterpiece as if the picture was holding him in a hypnotic spell.

"Well, I got to be draggin' my wagons back to town," the deputy sheriff grunted. "See you next spring when the next county taxes fall due, Trig."

Trenton whirled to dig his fingers into Wilson's sleeve.

"Listen, Les!" grated the Eagle. "Next time you see Hank Sentz in town, don't let on you've seen this picture, savvy? It's important. Danged important. You savvy that?"

Wilson grinned puzzledly. "Why, sure, if you say so. But Sentz ain't so touchy that he'd care about bein' pictured as a stage robber, I don't reckon—"

The Border Eagle joined the deputy's laugh. "It's . . . it's a joke I aim to play on that Rafter S buckaroo, Les. But remember what I said. Don't tip Sentz off that you ever seen this paintin'. I'll explain why—some day."

Ten minutes after the deputy had left, Trenton was saddling up Fleetfoot. His *alforja* bags were packed with supplies and his slicker-bound bedroll was tied on the cantle.

"Leavin', boss?" queried John Morehead, the TNT foreman.

Trenton swung into saddle, his eyes fixed on the distant Sunblaze Pass which led over to the cactus

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country where Hank Sentz's ranch was located.

"Yeah," he answered cryptically. "On law business, John. I never did turn in my marshal's badge, you remember."

Riding out of the TNT, the Eagle's brain was busy with many things. Chief among them was the unsolved riddle of what had become of the loot of the Wells Fargo stagecoach which formed the central theme of Bill Phelps' painting.

A *pasear* to Hank Sentz's ranch might go a long way toward unraveling that perplexing mystery.

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH ON THE RAFTER S.

NOON on the following day found the Border Eagle riding up the foothill wagon road which led from Caprock town to the Rafter S spread.

Trenton knew the Rafter S owner only by sight, having bumped into Hank Sentz occasionally in Caprock. Rumor had it that Sentz was a Texican; he had purchased the Rafter S when it had been a run-down homestead using the Rocking R brand.

Seemingly possessed of adequate financial footing, Sentz had imported blooded Hereford feeders from Montana to stock the spread. He had built a new ranchhouse, hay barns and fences, and had leased thousands of acres of government range land farther north. In the six years that he had owned the Rafter S, Sentz had gone a long way toward becoming the most influential cattleman east of the Sunblaze range. His beef drives were the envy of other ranchers in this section of Arizona and were equalled only by Trenton's TNT shipments from Suicide Valley.

Rumor also had it that Hank Sentz hired men as much for their ability to use a six-gun as for their skill with a rope and branding iron. But that was nothing to damn a man for this close to the Mexican border. Rustling was rampant, and a cowman who wanted to protect his interests often had to take the law into his own hands and resort to gun smoke and hot lead.

Such, it appeared, had been one of the secrets of Hank Sentz's phenomenal rise as a range baron. So far as Trig Trenton had ever heard, Sentz's herds expanded through thoroughly legitimate channels, and the reputation for being too free with a running iron and a wet blanket had never touched the Rafter S to Trenton's knowledge.

"There was close onto sixty thousand bucks' worth o' gold aboard that Wells Fargo stage when it was held up in Gunhammer Pass," the Border Eagle recalled. "Ed Wickburg an' Bill Phelps claimed the Pacheco Kid and their boss buried the loot followin' the robbery and didn't tell them where."

As a matter of record, the minor roles played by Wickburg and Phelps in the Gunhammer Pass outrage was all that kept them from stretching hemp. A jury, loath to sentence them to the gallows on purely circumstantial evidence, had sent them to Yuma instead.

Trenton was pondering these half-forgotten angles to a case he had long since considered closed, when he came in sight of Hank Sentz's spread.

The Rafter S was neatly kept, its corral fences whitewashed and its ranchhouse a rambling Spanish structure closely resembling Trenton's own place in Suicide Valley.

Stately peppers and regal palmettos reared their green tops above arched patio walls. The spread would have done credit to a Cali-

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fornia grandee's hacienda, back in the fiesta era before the advent of the Americano spelled the finish of those days.

"From here on out I got to watch my step," Trenton thought, loosening a six-gun in holster. "If Sentz was the jasper who murdered Pony Bob Paladine and tried to make off with that paintin' o' Phelps, he's prob'ly been expectin' me to show up long before this."

REINING up before the tile-roofed house, the Border Eagle surveyed his surroundings with approval. Mexican peons were tilling a lush grape vineyard midway up the foothill slope behind the ranchhouse. Others were cultivating olive and orange groves, and from a row of sheep-shearing pens some distance from the cattle corrals came the sounds of industry, reminding Trenton that Hank Sentz, unlike most cattlemen, also ran thousands of sheep in the back hills.

Dismounting, Trenton hitched Fleetfoot to an ornate iron tie rack and made his way up the porch steps. He jerked a bell rope alongside the massive redwood door and heard a jingle of spurs as someone approached from the inside.

The door swung open to reveal a chap-clad hombre whose face held the pallor of a man who had been confined for a long period indoors.

"Howdy," greeted Trenton, flashing a grin. "I—"

Then raw horror blazed in the inky-black eyes of the man who had opened the door. In that instant, the Border Eagle recognized Ed Wickburg, lately of Yuma Penitentiary and Bill Phelps' partner in the stagecoach robbery of a decade past.

"The Border Eagle!"

Wickburg choked on the name, even as he stabbed a palsied hand to the butt of the six-gun which rode a thonged-down holster on his left flank.

"Yeah," admitted Trenton hastily, "but you're gettin' proddy for no reason, Wickburg. The score between us was settled by the stretch you did at Yuma. You—"

Wickburg's hand, frozen momentarily on his Colt stock, darted upward and sunlight glinted on blued gun metal.

In the split clock tick of time that it took the ex-convict to whip his gun level and ear back the prong, the Border Eagle was faced with the ghastly alternative of kill or be killed.

Flinging himself violently to one side, Trenton's bronzed hands stabbed to his flanks, even as flame spat from the bore of Wickburg's gun and a bullet screamed through the space which the Eagle had occupied an instant before.

"Wickburg—you loco fool!"

The Eagle's bone-stocked .45s were darting from leather as he yelled the words, but Wickburg had dropped into a gun hawk's crouch and was swinging his gun about for a second shot.

Brrrang! Trenton's guns bucked and roared in unison. Gun smoke fanned up between the two men.

A gagged oath escaped Wickburg's ashen lips. The fuming Peacemaker slid from his fingers, and Wickburg rocked back, fingers clawing at the twin bullet holes which had been drilled through his ribs. Then Wickburg's knees unhinged, and he flopped sideways in the doorway.

Pouching his hot-barreled Colts, Trenton knelt beside the ex-convict's twitching body. But already death was glazing Wickburg's horror-filled eyes, putting a sag to his jaw.

"The crazy galoot—he forced my

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hand!" remarked Trenton bitterly. "Musta thought I had some old grievance to square up—that I was waitin' for him to get out of Yuma."

A THUD of slogging boots on the porch behind him caused Trenton to leap to his feet and whirl about, hands poised over gun butts.

A cinnamon-whiskered cowhand skidded to a halt a dozen feet away, staring through the mottled gun smoke at Wickburg's corpse. A brace of .45s hung in open holsters at the waddy's thighs, and his splayed fingers were frozen in the act of reaching for the guns. Held by the menace of Trenton's rocky gaze, the cowhand forced himself to speak with an effort.

"What . . . what's goin' on, stranger?" he demanded. "How come you salivated Wickburg thataway? Who are you? What you doin' on the Rafter S?"

Trenton grinned bleakly but did not relax his vigilance.

"I might ask you the same," he said evading the torrent of questions. "Wickburg answered the door when I yanked this bell rope. Without warnin' he dug for his cutters an' tried to smoke me down. There wasn't anything I could do but shoot in self-defense."

The cowboy licked his lips hesitantly, his eyes riveted to the United States marshal's badge pinned to Trenton's calfhide vest.

"A John Law, eh?" husked the man. "That's . . . that's different. I knowed Wickburg just got out o' the pen a month ago. What was it—" The waddy appeared to think better of his query, and ended lamely: "I'm Ray Stone. *Segundo* for the Rafter S. I heard shootin' an'—"

Mexican laborers were running up from all directions, halting to stare in shocked silence at the dead man crumpled on the threshold. The law badge on the stranger's vest brought a grudging respect from the wide-eyed peons.

"I came here," the Border Eagle clipped, "to see Hank Sentz. On personal business. Where is he, Stone?"

Ray Stone shuffled his feet nervously, his eyes avoiding Trenton's stare.

"Uh . . . Sentz has gone to Caprock . . . for supplies," stammered the foreman, his face twisting into hostile lines. "Not that it's ary o' your business, Johnny Law—"

A piping voice from the ranks of Mexican laborers interrupted the straw boss:

"No, Señor Stone. The *jefe*, he has gone to Sumac Mesa. I heard heem tell the *cociñero* to pack hees saddlebags for the *pasear, si.* He rode away thees morning, señor."

Trenton surprised a look of fiendish rage on Ray Stone's face, in the instant before both men swung about to stare down at a grinning Mexican lad at the foot of the porch steps. The *muchacho* was a younker of around twelve years clad in ragged pants, a jipi-straw sombrero and a grimy shirt.

"*Gracias, niño,*" the Border Eagle replied in Spanish. "What was Señor Sentz riding to Sumac Mesa for? When will he be back to the hacienda?"

Stone cut in sharply as the Mexican youth started to speak:

"Close-hobble your trap, you blasted little devil!"

Inhaling deeply, the Border Eagle stepped down to where the boy stood. Fishing a five-dollar gold piece out of his chaps pocket, Trenton pressed the coin into the youth's grimy palm.

"I am your friend, *muchacho,*" he

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said, continuing to speak the younker's native tongue. Then, glancing up at the foreman: "This is the law talkin', Stone. I want you to keep out of this."

Stone knotted his fists angrily. "Panchito's just a mealy-mouthed kid. He don't know nothin' about Sentz's comin's an' goin's. I tell you Hank Sentz is in Caprock—"

Trenton turned back to Panchito, who was eying the gold piece in his hand with bulging incredulity.

"Go on, Panchito." The lawman grinned.

Panchito gulped and exposed a battery of even white teeth.

"I was carrying water into the house for the cook," the Mexican waif responded uncertainly, "when I heard Señor Sentz say he was going to Sumac Mesa today to see an old friend—"

Trenton nodded grimly and decided to play a hunch.

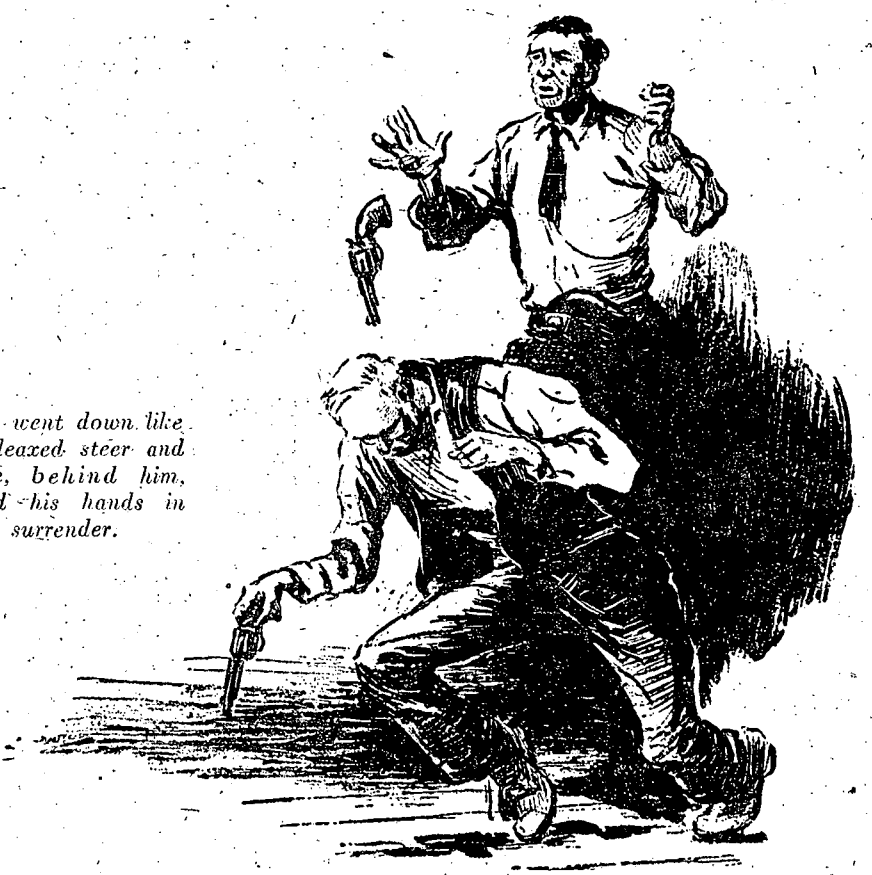
"This friend—was his name Bill Phelps? Think hard, now."

Panchito's eyes beamed with eagerness.

"*Si*," he declared promptly. "That was his name. Señor Wickburg told the *jefe* that Señor Phelps had gone to Sumac Mesa to hunt and fish. I do not know how long the *jefe* will be gone."

Trenton handed Panchito another gold piece. Then he turned to Ray Stone, who was white-lipped with suppressed wrath.

"This kid meant no harm, Stone.



Sentz went down like a poleaxed steer and Stone, behind him, raised his hands in surrender.

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I'm coming back in a week or so to see if Hank Sentz has returned. If I hear that you have laid a whip on Panchito, I'll—"

A grunt from a burly, serape-clad Mexican at Trenton's back caused the lawman to look around. The big *pelado* had an arm about Panchito.

"I'm Panchito's *padre*, señor," commented the peon. "The *segundo*, he does not dare to lay the hand on my *niño*."

Ray Stone essayed a feeble grin. "'Sta *bueno*. Mebbe I was mistaken about where the boss rid off to this mornin'. He told *me* he was headin' for Caprock. That little Mexie—always eavesdroppin'."

Striding back to where he had hitched Fleetfoot, Trenton called back to the sullen-faced ramrod:

"Tell Hank Sentz, when he gets back, that I'll foot whatever funeral expenses you have in disposin' of Wickburg."

"Hey!" shouted the foreman, as Trenton mounted and spurred away from the hitch bar. "You ain't even told me your name—"

But Trenton was gone, heading at a high lope toward Caprock. But he had no intention of riding in that direction any farther than the first hill which would put him out of view of the Rafter S.

For Sumac Mesa lay to the north, a half day's ride into the untamed Sunblaze uplands. Hank Sentz was bound there on a mission which Trenton was positive would end in the wanton murder of Bill Phelps. The presence of Ed Wickburg in the Rafter S ranchhouse, plus the eavesdropping which the water boy, Panchito, had done that morning, pointed to one thing: Bill Phelps and Hank Sentz had ridden the same dim trails in the past.

CHAPTER V.

SUMAC MESA REUNION.

THE rarefied mountain air and vitalizing Arizona sunshine were accomplishing for Bill Phelps what the prison doctors at Yuma would have believed impossible a month ago.

When Convict 7117 had left Yuma Penitentiary, he had been warned that his remaining time on earth was limited to weeks, perhaps days. But even doctors could be wrong.

Lean to the point of emaciation, Phelps had been a skeletal shell of the prime physical specimen he had been in the days when, as a youth of eighteen, he had swung a crooked loop along the border. In his late twenties now, the ravages of disease had wasted the layers of muscle from Phelps' frame, put a tremor in his once powerful hands, dimmed the luster in his keen, adventurous eyes. But he was slowly getting back his old lust for life.

Phelps' morals were fundamentally as sound as a dollar. Back in New York, before the wanderlust sent him West and into the company of owlhooters, Phelps had picked up a good education. His manners had always been those of a cultured gentleman, his artistic talents promising a fine future. If, as a tenderfoot, he had chosen the wrong trail when he had reached the frontier, it had been through a misdirected thirst for adventure, not because he was rotten at the core.

Eight years on the rock piles of Yuma had given Bill Phelps plenty of time to think on the values of life. Association with hardened criminals in the Arizona penal institution had maybe hardened his character, but not in a negative way. A natural-born artist, Phelps had been given

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permission to follow his leanings behind prison bars. When he had at length been given his freedom, he carried out of the gray walls of Yuma no festering desire for revenge against society, no sense of having been wronged by the law which had apprehended him.

Now, in the glorious natural scenery of the Sunblaze Mountains, Phelps believed he was winning his one-sided battle against the disease which had threatened him with premature death. He was living in a prospector's shack which, in company with the Pacheco Kid and Ed Wickburg, he had holed up in during his brief, ill-starred outlaw career.

Wild game abounded in the evergreen forests around Sumac Mesa, and the rivers teemed with fish. There was wood to cut against the oncoming winter, the roof to patch, water to carry daily from the burbling spring where a gold prospector had once grubbed with pick and pan in search of elusive metal.

The luster was back in Bill Phelps' eyes, now, and color had begun to replace the palor which imprisonment and ill health had put in his sunken cheeks. Each day found new energy restored to his veins. His muscles were even beginning to take on strength.

"And I've been here only a month. Five years in Sumac Mesa, and I'll be ready to go back home and start life over."

Bill Phelps muttered the words over and over like a prayer of thanksgiving, as he worked before the square of canvas on the easel he had set up on the banks of a rushing mountain stream which meandered over Sumac Mesa. With paint and brush he was setting down on canvas the splendor of the Western outdoors, paintings which he knew would find ready sale back in New York—paintings which would build a financial backlog, see him established in a studio of his own, once he had recovered his health and was back home among the friends of his boyhood.

WESTERING sun rays brought a cool breeze with them, and the thin-blooded ex-convict cached his half-finished painting in a nest of boulders and locked up his kit. Heading back along a deer trail which followed the fringe of the timber, Bill Phelps suddenly caught sight of the saddle horse tied in front of the prospector's cabin which he called home.

Phelps halted, eyes narrowing, something akin to fear putting a compression in his smile.

Then he headed on toward the shack.

"Some roving cowpoke, stopping in for a bite of grub." The artist chuckled. "I don't see why it's so hard for me to forget that I'm not on the dodge any more. I don't have to worry whenever I see a stranger around my hide-out."

Striding up to the cabin door, Phelps noted that the saddle horse was branded Rafter S on its rump. There was no sign of its owner outside the shack.

Opening the door, Bill Phelps halted as the mingled odors of whiskey and tobacco met his nostrils. A man was seated at his table, idly playing solitaire. He had taken the liberty of lighting the hanging kerosene lamp—a luxury Phelps rarely permitted himself, especially at twilight time, since fuel oil had to be packed into the mountains on mule-back.

"Howdy, stranger!" greeted Phelps, taking off his hat and sailing it expertly onto a rack above the

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door. "Glad to have company, up in this lonesome neck of the w—"

Phelps' voice trailed off, as the self-invited guest turned from the table to confront him with a leering snarl. The face was one which had tortured Phelps' dreams, back in Yuma.

"The Boss!"

A throaty chuckle issued from the old-time outlaw chief's flabby lips.

"Hank Sentz is the name, Phelps!" the Boss whispered flatly. "It ain't the name I carried when we used to be saddle pards on the owlhoot together. But it's a name that amounts to somethin' where I live now."

A pulse hammered on Phelps' brow as he settled into a rawhide-bottomed chair.

"You've done right well for yourself, Bill," Sentz went on, waving his arm around the room. "A right neat little studio you got here in your old roost. You done all this since you got out o' Yuma, kid?"

A sickening sensation clawed at Phelps' stomach as he glanced around the room.

The robber's roost of old was an artist's studio, now. In one corner was a life-size statue of a cougar, which Phelps had modeled out of native clay, using a varmint he had trapped as a model. The clay was still soft, the statue yet to be finished.

Paintings were hanging from the log walls—still lifes of wild flowers he had picked out on the mesa, panoramas of Arizona scenery he cherished beyond price, portraits of grim-visaged men who had been cell mates over in the Territorial prison.

"No, Boss. I—" Phelps gulped and started over. "Most of these canvases I brought them with me—when I got out. I—what do you want, Boss? You didn't come back here to . . . to hide out from the law, did you? Because I . . . I can't hide you here. I've been given a chance to go straight. I aim to—"

Hank Sentz guzzled deeply from a whiskey bottle he had brought along in his saddlebag that day.

"No, Phelps," sneered the outlaw. "I ain't on the dodge no more. I'm an influential citizen now. I come for another reason: to settle a score with you, my double-crossin' amigo!"

Horror gripped Bill Phelps as he saw Hank Sentz slide a long-barreled Peacemaker from its thonged-down holster.

"You painted a picture o' me robbin' that stagecoach over on Gunhammer Pass, Phelps!" snarled the Rafter S owner. "And you sent it to the Border Eagle, hopin' it would put a hang noose around my craw. I'm goin' to kill you for doin' that, you mangy son!"

Panic made Phelps' knees wabble as he saw the look of raw hate which came to a boil in Sentz's eyes. He had seen that same look in the Boss' eyes before, and knew it always preceded violent death for some luckless victim.

"Give me a fightin' chance—Boss," croaked the ex-convict. "I don't even own a gun. You wouldn't shoot me down like a dog—"

A grating laugh exploded from Sentz's teeth as he eared back the hammer of his Colt. But in the instant before his finger could flex on trigger to drive a slug into the artist's chest, a high-pitched yell from outdoors arrested Sentz's attention. The yell was accompanied by a thunder of hoofbeats leading up to the very door of the shack.

WITH an oath of alarm, Sentz leaped to the doorway. Then his thumb eased his gun hammer down as he recognized Ray Stone swinging

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out of the stirrups and ground-tying his lathered horse at the doorway.

"There's trouble comin', Boss!" yelled the Rafter S foreman, rushing up to the doorway. "The Border Eagle's ridin' over here for a showdown. I'm lucky I was able to get here first—in time to warn you about that tin star—"

Sentz's face turned putty color as Stone reeled into the cabin, shot a hard look at Bill Phelps and then drank eagerly from Sentz's bottle of forty-rod.

"Pull yourself together, Stone!" gruffed the outlaw, keeping Bill Phelps under the menace of his six-gun. "How come the Eagle knew I was at Sumac Mesa today?"

Slumping into a chair, Ray Stone talked, babbling his story like a crazy man in delirium, describing the shoot-out which had killed Ed Wickburg, and the tattle-tale tongue of the Mexican kid which tipped off Trenton about Sentz's trip.

"Wickburg musta gone off half-cocked when he recognized Trenton, an' dug for his hoglegs," Stone said. "I know it was the Border Eagle, because the cook heard Wickburg bellow out Trenton's nickname when he opened the door an' saw this stranger standin' there."

Sentz's lips compressed grimly. "You're dead certain that John Law's headin' here, eh?"

Stone fortified his ragged nerves with another slug of whiskey and nodded. "He pertended he was headin' for Caprock—but I trailed him. A mile south o the ranch, he cut off into the Sunblazes, headin' this direction. So I rattled my hocks over here to let you know. I reckon he'll be showin' up here any time now. He took the Skyline Trail. I took short cuts he didn't know about, in order to reach here first."

There was a long silence, broken only by the sawing breaths of the two outlaws. The stillness was interrupted by Bill Phelps, who had been a mute listener to the foreman's narrative.

"Boss." Phelps gulped audibly. "Boss—I want to make a deal with you. You ought to know I hate the Border Eagle—as much as either of you hombres do. After all, Trig Trenton sent me to Yuma for ten of the best years of my life."

Sentz and his foreman swung contemptuous glares at the trembling artist. Phelps' caved-in cheeks were oozing sweat.

"What sort of a deal could you be ribbin' up?" sneered the Rafter S owner. "You won't even be alive when Trig Trenton shows up at this shack, you yellow traitor!"

"A gunshot—now—would tip off the Border Eagle that you're in the cabin here," Phelps pointed out desperately. "For all we know, Trenton may be sneaking up on the shack now."

Sentz cast an apprehensive glance through the doorway at the gathering twilight out on Sumac Mesa. He was fully aware that the Border Eagle would not ride up boldly in plain sight. Not when the United States marshal had come to Sumac Mesa on showdown business.

"Trenton isn't insured against a trap," Phelps went on. "Especially if I'm your bait for that trap, Boss."

The Rafter S owner stepped over to the table and blew out the lamp. In the darkness of the cabin, they were safe against surprise from without.

Stepping over to where Bill Phelps stood, Sentz reamed his gun muzzle into the artist's ribs.

"Keep talkin," ordered the out-

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law. "What kind of a trap are you schemin' up, Phelps?"

The artist's breathing fanned Sentz's jowl. "If Trenton sees a light in this cabin—and creeps up," he said, "he'll see me inside here working at my easel. He won't see any trace of you and your foreman here. You and your horses will be hidden—outside somewhere. The Eagle will feel safe, then. He'll come inside, believing me to be his friend. And sooner or later, I'll have a chance to get a drop on him."

Ray Stone laughed coldly. "We'd be fools to give this buskie a gun, Boss. Him an' the Eagle could fort up inside here an'—"

"Then I could stab him with a butcher knife," Phelps said pleadingly. "After all, Sentz—you were planning to kill me for double-crossing you to the law. But if I kill that lawman—won't the dead body of the Border Eagle be price enough to pay for my life?"

After a lengthy pause, Hank Sentz came to a decision.

"It's a deal," he rasped out, removing his Colt muzzle from the artist's side. "I ain't hankerin' to swap lead with Trig Trenton, if I can help it. He's a shootin' fool, Trenton is."

A note of fresh hope edged Phelps' voice as he found Sentz's hand in the darkness and shook it.

"You pledge me your word, then, to spare my life—if I kill the Border Eagle?" he asked tremulously.

Sentz laughed tonelessly. "You got my word, Phelps," he promised. "But remember—no false plays. Stone an' me will be ambushed out in them cottonwoods by the spring. an' there's a full moon due to rise any minute now. If you try teamin' up with that marshal, neither one of you'll get out o' this shack alive."

CHAPTER VI.

TRAP FOR THE EAGLE.

A SILVER moon was riding the night sky when Trigger Trenton gigged his mustang over the last rock-spined ridge and looked out across the lush acres of Sumac Mesa.

A high saddle-back formation which straddled the summit of the Sunblaze Mountain range, Sumac Mesa was a hunter's paradise. More than once in the past, after the fall beef gather was over and his TNT steers were rolling toward the mid-western markets, Trenton had hunted deer and elk in the forests girdling Sumac Mesa. On several occasions he had even used the old prospector's shack at the base of the Vermillion Cliffs as a camp. It was the only human habitation in a fifty-mile radius, and as a result Trenton believed it was likely that Bill Phelps would use the place as a home during his battle for health.

Accordingly, the Border Eagle headed due east when he hit the level floor of Sumac Mesa. Through brisket-high clumps of flowering sumac which had given the lofty meadow its name, Trenton spurred Fleetfoot toward the looming scarp of red volcanic lava known as the Vermillion Cliffs. Rounding the shoulder of the lava formation which jutted out into the mesa, Trenton reined up as he caught sight of a glare of lamp light inside the log cabin built at the edge of the talus at the base of the Vermillion Cliffs.

"That'll be Phelps' hide-out, all right," muttered Trenton. "But there ain't a chance I'll find that poor devil alive. More likely Hank Sentz lighted that lamp."

Riding back out of sight of the cabin, Trenton dismounted and tied Fleetfoot to a juniper bush. Then, inspecting the loads of his twin

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Colts, the Eagle headed stealthily toward the Vermillion Cliffs, cursing the brilliant moonlight as he stalked over to the edge of the talus. He could take no chances on his approach being spotted from the cabin. There was little doubt but that Hank Sentz was here before him. There was even less chance that he would find Bill Phelps still alive.

Details of recent events were obscure in Trenton's mind, but he believed that Sentz's hurried trek to Sumac Mesa, to visit his ex-partner in outlawry, stemmed from the oil painting which Phelps had made while a convict in Yuma Pen. Somehow—perhaps through Ed Wickburg, Phelps' fellow prisoner—Hank Sentz must have learned of the painting which, if properly interpreted, would brand him as one of the Gunhammer Pass stage robbers.

If that was so, then Hank Sentz was probably the outlaw who had murdered the RFD carrier, Pony Bob Paladine, in a futile effort to intercept the painting. It was not until Wickburg's arrival at the Rafter S Ranch, then, Trenton reasoned, that Sentz had learned the whereabouts of Bill Phelps, here on Sumac Mesa.

Crawling on his belly, the Border Eagle worked his way with infinite patience across the grassy open stretch between the cliff talus pile and the prospector's cabin.

Smoke curled from the fireplace chimney; lamp light, gleaming through chinks in the log walls, revealed from time to time the shadow of a man passing between the wall and the lamp.

That man could be Bill Phelps. But more probably it was Hank Sentz, spending the night here on Sumac Mesa before returning to the Rafter S. If Trenton had the happenings of this day sized up correctly, the unlucky artist from Yuma Penitentiary was already coyote bait.

EVEN as he was reaching the corner of the shack, crawling flat on his stomach through protecting grass, the Eagle heard a horse nicker from the bosque of cottonwoods which rimmed the spring where Phelps got his drinking water.

"Sentz's bronc, or I'm a loco leppie!" thought Trenton, hand tightening on gun stock.

Inch by inch, Trenton crawled up to the cabin wall. Then, after a careful glance around to make sure no one was outside, the sombreroed lawman raised up on his elbows and applied one eye to a crack where rock-moss chinking had fallen out between two logs.

He had a full view of the interior of the shack. He saw a table with a whiskey bottle and a lamp on it, a bunk covered with a Hudson's Bay blanket, a rusty barrel stove, a group of oil paintings leaning against the wall.

Then he caught sight of a man's legs, clad in denim Levis and wearing Mexican sandles. That would hardly be the type of footgear Hank Sentz would have worn on his *pasear* across the mountains from the Rafter S.

Unable to see more of the man from his knees up, Trenton cautiously made his way around the back wall of the cabin and got to his feet to peer through a gunny-sack-curtained window.

Through a hole in the burlap, the Eagle saw a bone-lean man with an artist's palette on his left forearm. With his thin right hand, the hombre was applying paint to a clay statue which was lying on a wooden bench.

"Phelps!" The name gusted from Trenton's lips like a sigh of relief.

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"Then Sentz hasn't arrived, after all!"

From the window, Trenton had a view of the other end of the single-roomed cabin. Phelps was alone; there was no doubt of that. Alone and unharmed. Could it be possible, by any remote chance, that Phelps, not Hank Sentz, had emerged victor from the shoot-out which Trenton was sure must have occurred here on Sumac Mesa earlier that day?

There was only one way to find out. Discarding caution, the Border Eagle went to the back door of the cabin and, without the formality of a knock, opened it and stepped into the warm interior of the cabin.

Phelps looked up from his art work with a violent start, his eyes like saucers as he stared at the chap-clad Stetsoned hombre who stood on the threshold.

"I'm Trig Trenton, in case you'd forgotten!" The marshal grinned. "I rode over here to . . . to thank you for that oil paintin' you mailed me awhile back, Phelps!"

The ex-convict sleeved a film of sweat from his paint-smudged brow and grinned uncertainly.

"I . . . I'm glad to see you, Trenton," the artist said shakily. "Come on in and . . . and set down. I was just doing a little clay sculpture."

The two met over a handshake—lawman and ex-outlaw, who had last seen each other in a Phoenix courtroom where Bill Phelps had heard a judge pronounce his prison sentence.

If Trenton detected a strained note in his host's manner, he attributed it to an embarrassment which was wholly understandable under the circumstances.

"My belly's empty," the Eagle said. "You reckon you could spare some java out o' that pot you got warmin' in the fireplace?"

Phelps grinned apologetically.

"I've forgotten my manners," he said, taking a tin cup from a shelf and hurrying over to the hearth. "Having you drop in out of the blue sky this way . . . well, I . . . my nerves are all raw anyway—"

Phelps' hand shook so that he slopped coffee into the fire. Steam wafted from the sizzling ashes as the ex-convict handed Trenton the coffee cup, then took down a bag of sugar and a spoon from the mantel shelf.

"That statue you're workin' on," the Border Eagle commented, glancing over his shoulder at the mass of soft clay on Phelps' workbench, "I'd almost say it was a dead ringer for—"

Phelps' move came without warning, then, catching Trenton's hands busy sugaring his cup of java. With a stabbing motion too quick for eye to follow, the cadaverous artist jerked a bone-stocked Peacemaker from Trenton's nearest holster. Cocking the gun, the ex-convict swung into a killer's crouch as he leveled the Colt point-blank at Trenton's heart.

CHAPTER VII.

PHANTOM BULLETS.

HANK SENTZ and Ray Stone were crouched in the darkness of the dwarf cottonwoods and scrub willows which fringed the waterhole below the Vermillion Cliffs.

Though they had kept their eyes riveted on the moon-washed ground around the cabin, it came as a surprise when a mutter of men's voices reached them from inside the prospector's shack. It seemed impossible that anyone could have reached the building, in the brilliant moon glow, without their having spotted his approach.

"The Border Eagle sneaked into

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that cabin right under our noses!" whispered Hank Sentz angrily. "Either that, or Phelps is in there talkin' to himself. Convicts get that way."

Ray Stone fingered his cinnamon beard nervously. "Your hoss caught a strange scent—that's why he nickered a couple minutes back, Boss. The way I figger it, the Eagle crawled up through that toboso

grass an' come in the back door, out o' range of our view."

Shadows crossed and recrossed the burlap-curtained front window. They heard Phelps' nervous laughter, the rattle of tin dishes being taken off a shelf.

"Here's hopin' Phelps don't lose his nerve," grunted Sentz. "He's prob'ly bidin' his time to stick a butcher knife in Trenton's backbone."

Ten endless minutes dragged by, and the ambushed killers out by the spring began to have misgivings. What if Phelps had thought up a cunning scheme to betray them? What if the artist, knowing his own desperate predicament, tipped off Trigger Trenton and the two crawled out the back door and escaped from the shack?

"We've waited long enough!" bit out Sentz. "You stay here, Ray. I'm headin' for the Vermillion Cliffs, where I can cover the back door with my smoke poles. If that double-crosser tries to—"

Sentz broke off, as the night stillness was exploded by the ear-stunning roar of a six-gun.

Inside the prospector's shack there sounded a heavy crash, as of a body tumbling heavily to the floor, smashing a piece of furniture as it did so.

The two outlaws froze, pulses racing, eyes glued to the moonlit cabin.

Then the door swung wide open, to reveal Ray Phelps' bony figure silhouetted against the lamp light. A smoking six-gun was clutched in Phelps' right hand.

"Boss!" yelled the ex-convict, his voice a tremulous quaver. "It's O. K. It's . . . it's finished. I shot the Border Eagle in the heart. He's dead . . . stone dead."

Sentz's foreman released a pent-up breath and started to burrow out of the willows But he halted when Hank Sentz seized him by one arm.

"This may be a trap baited for *us*, pardner!" whispered the Rafter S man. "We got to make sure Phelps ain't trickin' us to come out into the open where the Border Eagle could pot-shoot us from the house—"

Phelps took a faltering step outside, and his quivering yell reached them again:

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"Boss! Did you hear me? I said the Eagle is dead!"

Sentz eared back his Colt hammer and chuckled bleakly.

"Drop that hogleg, Phelps, an' come out halfway to meet us!" shouted the ambusher. "You're goin' to be our bodyguard until we've seen for sure that you salivated that John Law—"

Phelps dropped the Eagle's six-gun and raised his arms. Then, keeping inside the bar of lamp light which penciled through the open doorway, the consumptive artist lurched his way toward the springs.

KEEPING Phelps between them and the house, the two outlaws came into the open, guns ready. In a low crouch, they hurried out to where Phelps was standing.

"Don't you believe me?" quavered the artist. "I . . . I had a chance to grab Trenton's gun when he had his hands full with a cup of coffee. He . . . he tried to draw his other gun and I let him have it—point-blank!"

Sentz lunged forward to jab a gun barrel into Phelps' belly.

"Turn around an' head for the door!" ordered the owlhoot rancher. "We're just playin' safe, is all. Stone, keep behind me. If the Eagle starts shootin', his slugs will hit Phelps."

Keeping squarely behind the trembling artist, the two outlaws crept up to the open doorway. Then, staring into the smoke-hazed room, Hank Sentz peered beyond the ex-convict to stare at the motionless figure sprawled on the floor in front of the fireplace. It was Trenton.

The corpse of the Border Eagle lay in a twisted position, a rivulet of crimson dripping off his calfhide vest to form a mirror on the hearth stones. In one hand the dead lawman still clutched a tin coffee cup.

Firelight flickered on Trenton's face, revealing the death-glazed eyes, the half-open lips. Trenton was clad as he had been the day Hank Sentz ambushed Pony Bob Paladine—in green shirt, coffee-colored Stetson, bullhide chaps and spurred mule-ear cow boots.

"He could be playin' possum, Boss!" whispered Ray Stone, behind the rancher. "A slug in the noggin would make sure Phelps ain't puttin' anything over on us."

Phelps gasped as Sentz's gun roared, and the Border Eagle's head jerked from the slug that tunneled his cheek.

"O. K.—now we *know* he's a goner." Sentz laughed, shoving Phelps ahead of him into the room. "Turn around, Phelps. You wanted a payoff—an' it's comin' at you. Stand up an' eat lead!"

His arms still elevated, the scrawny artist lurched into the middle of the room and turned about, his eyes bulging as he saw Hank Sentz taking deliberate aim at his chest.

"You . . . you promised me . . . if I killed Trenton—"

Sentz laughed fiendishly. "My life wouldn't be safe as long as you were still above ground, Phelps!" grated the outlaw. "I'm—"

Something moved in the shadows behind the open doorway to Sentz's left, then, and the Rafter S owner whirled about, nerves jumpy with suspense.

"Elevate, buskies!" came a snake-like whisper from the gloom. "You're covered!"

Out of the door's shadow stepped an apparition clad only in underwear and woolen socks. Lamp light picked out high lights on a muscle-slabbed torso, glinted on the blue-steel barrel of the six-gun which jutted from the hombre's hand, its

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bore weaving like a bull rattler's head between Ray Stone and Hank Sentz.

"*Trig Trenton!*" cried the Rafter S boss, as he recognized the Border Eagle's shock of brown hair and amber eyes. "It's a ghost!"

Something snapped in Sentz's brain, then. Over by the fireplace the Border Eagle lay dead, a bullet in his heart, another in his skull. This phantom who had emerged from behind the door couldn't be real; the gun in his hand couldn't be real.

Sentz's gun leaped up and spat flame, but his shot was wild.

Not so the phantom bullets of the ghost of the Border Eagle. The lone Colt bucked and roared in the spook's hand, and Sentz went down like a poleaxed heifer, blood spurting from a bullet hole drilled neatly between his eyes.

Through swimming gun smoke, the Eagle's ghost saw Ray Stone drop to his knees, gun falling to the floor as he raised his arms in supplication.

"Don't shoot! I ain't buckin' a . . . a phantom!" moaned the Rafter S foreman piteously. "Tell me I'm dreamin' this, Phelps! Tell me I'm loco!"

RAY STONE wasn't loco; his brain had never been more vividly alert. He got his explanation after Phelps had trussed the owlhooter's arms securely behind him with a piece of rope.

"A *statue* of the Border Eagle, Stone." The artist laughed.

He saw Ray Stone sway on the verge of fainting, his eyes following Trenton over to the effigy sprawled by the fireplace.

"My masterpiece, if I do say so myself," Phelps went on. "While I was waiting for the Border Eagle to show up tonight, I tore down that clay model of a cougar and molded it into the shape of a man. I painted the head as I would a portrait on canvas—to look like Trig Trenton as I remembered him last. And that pool of blood was nothing but red paint—"

Stone grasped the fantastic truth as he watched Trenton remove his chaps, boots and shirt from the clay statue and dress himself. Never in his life had the Border Eagle stripped off his clothing as rapidly as he had after Bill Phelps got a drop on him and explained, in terse, frantic whispers, that two outlaws were watching the murder trap from the waterhole chaparral.

"I'm kind of sorry Sentz forced my hand," Trenton stated as he removed his Stetson from the realistically painted head of his clay image. "He died thinking he was bucking my ghost!"

The Border Eagle grinned bleakly at the dead outlaw. "Sentz used the loot of that Gunhammer Pass stage robbery to buy the Rafter S," he continued. "I reckon Wells Fargo will take over that spread, now. And they'll pay off a heavy reward for this bandit's capture, Phelps—a reward that's payable to you. Five thousand bucks ain't bad for a statue you whipped into shape in less than two hours, eh?"

Bill Phelps' hand was rock-steady as he poured another cup of coffee for his star-toting guest. The bitter years he had wasted behind Yuma's walls would be small price to pay indeed, considering the brilliant future which lay ahead.

The Border Eagle will be riding the justice trail again in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West. Watch for the next thrilling episode!

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There in the rain, Bill resolved to get revenge for his butchered cattle.

When rustlers' traps are thicker than ticks on sheep, the only thing unarmed ex-pistol makers can do is take a

GUNSMITH'S GAMBLE

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

THE rain, starting to fall at mid-morning, had increased to a steady downpour, driven out of the northwest by a gusty wind. The gale deadened scent so that Bill Rossiter's cayuse almost stepped upon the cow, lying there in the brush. When the horse snorted and drew back, the cowman needed only a glance to tell that it was one of his own cows, dead from a rifle bullet. There was no indication anywhere, however, of the calf which should have been hanging about.

Rossiter's lips drew tight. The rain had washed out all traces of whomever had been here, but there was still plenty of sign to show that the

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cow had been killed since dawn—which was a clear indication, if more had been needed, that the orphaned calf had not been killed by a wolf or coyote.

"Chances are the calf's wearin' a brand that ain't mine, by now, and when the cow got in the way of that operation, the thief shot her," Rossiter summarized to himself. He looked around for a moment, then swung his horse abruptly for home. He'd ridden off that morning without a gun, and a gun seemed to be called for now. The trail might be hard to follow, but he had a hunch where to go. This wasn't the first calf that had been rustled from his herd lately.

THE rain had stopped by the time he reached his own barn, though the clouds still hung low to the horizon and the mud was deep underfoot. Driven by his still-seething anger, Rossiter moved almost at a run. As his fingers closed on the doorknob, his feet struck a slick patch of mud and went out from under him, causing him to jerk at the door.

"Whoo-om!"

For an instant, Rossiter lay there, half-paralyzed with fear. Just for a moment. Then cold rage replaced the smoldering anger in his eyes, and he got to his feet, the powder smoke still acrid in his nostrils, his ears still ringing with the discharge of the gun just above his head.

With the door open, it didn't take much looking to see what had happened—a rifle was lashed across a table just inside the door, with a cord running from the trigger to a board, which the opening door had jerked. The gun had been aimed to strike him fairly in the chest with a heavy-caliber bullet, and only the fact of the rain's causing his feet to slip from under him had saved his life.

Rossiter's eyes hardened as he examined the rifle. Up to a few months ago, he'd lived in town, with gunsmithing as a trade. During the time he had spent at it, he had worked on a lot of guns and gotten to know most of the weapons all around that part of the country. And he hadn't forgotten.

There was no mistaking this murder rifle. It belonged to Sam Whipps, who was building up a spread of his own, adjoining Rossiter on the north. Building it up, apparently, with a running iron. Rossiter had bluntly informed Whipps, a few days before, of his suspicions that some of his own calves were growing up to wear the Whipps brand, and had warned that such a practice had got to stop. Now the dead cow and missing calf, and this set-gun for murder, seemed to be Whipps' answer.

A look around the cabin showed that the would-be killer had made himself right at home. Confident that Rossiter was out on the range, and that he would be a dead man before he ever got inside the door again, had lent the invader confidence. Rossiter still did a bit of gun-repairing on the side, as a hobby. Two or three guns and some of his tools had been on the table, and now two of those guns were gone—one of them a handsome pearl-handled revolver.

Holstering his own gun, Rossiter went back to the barn. Whipps would be surprised to have a caller, when he was probably figuring him Rossiter already dead. Whipps might have a few other surprises, too, before the thing was over—some not so pleasant.

Rossiter had ridden a little more than a mile when the second ambush bullet came, and he realized just too late that his anger had blinded him

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to caution. It was a natural thing that the killer should lurk somewhere in the vicinity to watch how his gun trap worked—and when that had failed, and Rossiter had set out to hunt him down, the next play for such a coyote would be to shoot from ambush. Which was what had happened.

The bullet caught Rossiter's cayuse, the heavy rifle slug piercing the animal's heart. The horse gave one frantic leap and went down, the whole thing happening so swiftly that there was no time for Rossiter to jump free. The ground seemed to rise up and hit him, then things went black.

WHEN he recovered consciousness a few minutes later, with an aching head and a cruel pain in his right leg, it didn't take long to discover that he was trapped. That jump of his stricken cayuse had taken it off the cow path it was following along the rim of a little coulee, pitching man and horse alike down ten feet to the bottom. Rossiter had fallen free of the horse so far as his body was concerned, otherwise he would have been crushed. But his right foot was underneath that dead weight.

Straining, gasping with the pain of it, Rossiter worked for several minutes, then lay back panting. It was no use. The weight was too much for him to pull his foot loose or even stir the dead weight of the horse by trying to lift at it. The ground had been softened enough by the rain so that he didn't think any bones had been broken; but the earth was still too hard to dig a way out.

A new thought caused him to look about hastily for his gun. It had tumbled from the holster and lay just a little way off—just beyond the farthest reach of his straining fingers.

Rossiter lay quiet for a moment, taking stock. Off here on his own land and down in the coulee, the possibility of anyone finding him was remote, since he was all alone on the ranch, with no gun to signal with. He had but one hope: whoever had fired that ambush bullet would probably be coming along at any minute now to have a look and make sure that the job was well done. Finding him still alive, but trapped and weaponless, the killer would proceed to finish the murder.

"Lucky he didn't come while I was out cold," Rossiter thought.

Spurred by the grim certainty of what would come, Rossiter made another try at reaching the gun or getting free. With cold sweat starting on his face he finally lay quiet and waited at the sound of hoofbeats approaching, his face graying a little. Then his eyes widened with sudden hope at sight of the man who rode into sight.

It wasn't Whipps. This was Kreig, who was likewise a neighbor, building up a spread of his own. Kreig had always been a good neighbor. He stared in surprise now at sight of Rossiter, looked quickly around and dismounted to hurry forward.

"I was ridin' off there and thought I heard a shot," he explained. "What happened, Bill?"

"Some murderin' coyote tried to bush me and almost succeeded," Rossiter explained. "If you can lift a little, I think I can pull my foot out."

"Sure thing," Kreig agreed. He stooped, secured a hold, bent his back and lifted. Two hundred pounds of bone and muscle, the man was strong as a horse and, even under such a burden, seemed to have little

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trouble. Rossiter pulled his foot free, got unsteadily to his feet and tested his weight on it, wincing a little. Then he picked up his gun and thrust it into the holster.

"Thanks, Kreig," he said. "I won't be forgettin' that."

Kreig watched him anxiously.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"I'll make out," Rossiter agreed. "I'll go back and get another horse, then I'm headin' for Whipps'—and maybe he won't enjoy my visit."

"Maybe not," Kreig agreed. "I ain't askin' questions—but that hombre's a bad egg, Bill. Watch your step."

"Bad egg ain't half of it," Rossiter snapped. "He's rotten as a last-year's snake skin. But this time I'll be watchin'."

TWO hours later, moving with caution, making good on his promise to Kreig to watch, Rossiter rode through a patch of brush up behind Whipps' little shack. The place was a lot like Rossiter's own spread, with both of them trying to get a start. A bitter smile twisted Rossiter's mouth as he dismounted. The way he was sneaking around here, one would almost take him for a bushwhacker. But after two tries at murder in one day, it paid to be careful. When he settled with Whipps, it would be openly, face to face—but there was going to be a settlement.

A thin streamer of smoke curled up from the pipe above the roof and seemed to drop again in the heavy, moist air; and there came a rattle of pots and pans from inside. Whipps was back, then. The noise was further confirmation that he had been away for hours, had just returned and was rustling himself up some grub.

The fact that Kreig had happened along when he had probably accounted for Whipps' not making a closer investigation after that last shot. He hadn't wanted to be seen fooling around there, of course. But he was probably confident that he had killed Rossiter.

Rossiter's leg was swollen and painful, but he disregarded it. Leaving his horse, he strode forward, beat a vicious tattoo on the door with his knuckles. There was a momentary hesitation, and his fingers hovered close to his gun butt. If Whipps opened the door with gun in hand, he'd be ready for him.

But when Whipps opened the door, he still held the knob in one hand and a frying pan in the other. He stared for a moment, plainly a little disconcerted, his face reddening with anger as Rossiter unceremoniously pushed his way in and shoved the door shut with a kick of his foot.

"Didn't expect to see me here, did you, Whipps?" he asked.

Whipps had stepped back, staring. Now he slowly placed the frying pan down on the stove again, wiping his hands on his pants.

"No," he admitted. "I didn't." The hostility of that last meeting, when Rossiter had charged him with rustling, was still in his eyes. "Suppose you tell me what you want?"

"Just one thing," Rossiter said, and his smile was mirthless. "I've come here to do the job you've tried twice and failed at. I'm going to kill you, Whipps."

He's expected Whipps to bluster, to offer denial or to make a sudden desperate try for his own gun. Instead, Whipps merely stared back at him, his face wooden.

"You mind explainin' what this is all about first?" Whipps asked.

"You know well enough what it's about," Rossiter growled. "I knew your rifle when I saw it, Whipps."

Swiftly, Whipps' eyes lifted to the

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elk horns above his door, his face showed a little surprise.

"My rifle?" he repeated. "Seems to be gone, though I hadn't noticed it. It was up above the door, the last I knew."

"It isn't going to do you a bit of good to lie, Whipps," Rossiter warned, his voice suddenly brittle. "I found my cow where you'd shot it when you stole the calf. And the only reason that rifle didn't kill me when I opened my door was because I slipped in the mud and it just missed me. I suppose you'll deny that you weren't hangin' around there, or didn't take a shot at me when I rode out—or that you didn't kill my horse?"

Whipps shook his head slowly.

"I won't say that I wasn't around there, Rossiter," he said, "since I was. But I didn't try to ambush you. I don't do things that way."

"You're a liar and a yellow coward along with being a thief and a bushwhacker," Rossiter raged. "Pull your gun. I'm givin' you an even break—but I'm killing you just the same. Drag your gun, I say."

Whipps' face had paled, but he only shook his head.

"You're makin' a mistake, Rossiter," he repeated. "I didn't do it."

"Liar!" Rossiter snarled. "Pull your rod, I tell you!"

Again Whipps shook his head.

"No," he said stubbornly.

"Then I'll kill you where you stand!" Rage shook Rossiter, his gun was in his hand. "I gave you a chance to fight it out, man to man—"

Whipps' face was dead white now as Rossiter raised the gun, but Whipps still made no move toward his own holstered weapon.

"If you're set on killing me, Rossiter, go ahead," he said. "I wouldn't have a chance with you, anyway—and I'm no killer."

Rossiter half-raised the gun, let it sag again. This was a new Whipps, a different man than he'd ever known him before or pictured him in his mind. But Rossiter's anger was the more bitter at this defeat.

"Whipps," he raged. "I'd ought to kill you—"

Rossiter stopped, staring. His jaw sagged a little, and he looked more closely at the gun in his hand. Then abruptly he broke it open, staring in incredulity and disbelief. It was empty!

HE darted a sudden, suspicious glance at Whipps, but Whipps was merely staring back, a little of the strain leaving his face, a trace of color returning to it; and something of the surprise which was on Rossiter's face was reflected in Whipps' as he saw that Rossiter had threatened him with an empty gun, challenged him to a duel with it. But he was making no move toward his own gun. Rossiter stared at him.

"What's the trouble?" Whipps asked.

"Mebbe I've made a mistake, Whipps," Rossiter said huskily. "Mebbe I owe you an apology. If you was a killer, now'd be your chance to finish me off—"

"Your apology's accepted," Whipps agreed, and there was the shadow of a smile on his tight lips. "There's been some misunderstanding here, that's plain. Why did you come here with an empty gun and try to make me draw?"

"I didn't figure on the empty," Rossiter confessed. He was still staring at the empty chambers, brow corrugated. "Somebody shot my horse from under me, and I was trapped by one leg—knocked cold for a spell. My gun fell just out

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of reach. Soon as I got hold of it, I holstered it again, not stoppin' to look twice at it—it was loaded when I started out."

"Somebody must have gotten hold of it while you were unconscious, and taken the shells out," Whipps suggested.

"Yeah, that must be what happened, all right," Rossiter agreed, his face twisted with the effort at figuring it out. "It could have happened. But whoever did that must have been the killer that tried to bush me in the first place. Why didn't he finish the job?"

"Only reason I can think of is that I was ridin' around that section about then myself," Whipps suggested. "I don't mind confessin', Rossiter, that I was lookin' to see if I could find any of my stock wearin' your brand—I've been missin' plenty lately, and I figured your jumpin' me the other day was just dust in my eyes. Anyway, I heard the shot, but I didn't see you. I rode around quite awhile tryin' to find out what was going on. Likely the killer didn't care to risk another shot with me where I'd hear."

"Looks like I've sure had you all wrong," Rossiter confessed. "Did you see anybody—"

"I saw Kreig, two or three times—"

"Hands up, you two! Reach fast!"

Both men whirled, startled. The door had pushed soundlessly open, and Kreig stood there, gun menacing them, his face a mask of hate. Slowly he sidled in, closed the door and set his back to it, the gun unwavering.

"Since you're gettin' to comparin' notes and startin' to turn this into a love feast, looks like it's up to me to take a hand," he grated. "You've had a lot of luck today, Rossiter, but it's plumb run out now. I thought sure I had you twice, and I aimed to finish you that last time. But Whipps kept pokin' around, and I knew he'd seen me, so I didn't dare finish you off right then."

BOTH men eyed him in silence for a moment, understanding coming to them. The motive behind this was clear enough now. Kreig wanted not only their cattle, but their land as well. His own spread was crowded by both their outfits. He had worked it to set them against each other, hoping that they would kill each other off.

When they had been too slow with quarreling to fit his plans, he had fixed up that trap gun in Rossiter's cabin, being sure that it would do the work. And he had stolen Whipps' gun for the murder weapon, so that when the authorities investigated and found it, they would dispose of Whipps for him.

"You was too big a coward to shoot me when I was trapped. Then you'd have had to face Whipps man to man," Rossiter said slowly.

"That's right," Kreig agreed. "I ain't fool enough to take chances. I aimed to bash your head in, but you was startin' to recover consciousness, and Whipps was prowlin' pretty close by. But right now I'm finishin' this up. You both know too much, and can't be allowed to go on livin'."

The gun had shifted so that the muzzle covered Whipps now, Rossiter saw—and he saw something more. This was the pearl-handled weapon that had been stolen from his table back at the cabin.

"What I'm going to do," Kreig went on, "is to kill you, Whipps. I got you covered, and you ain't got a chance to drag your gun and beat me. Then I'll finish you off, Rossiter

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—for you've got an empty gun. That'll make it look like you come here, as you did, to kill Whipps, and he got you at the same time. Nobody'll ever suspect me. And now—"

A sudden snarl twisted his lips, his finger was starting to tighten on the trigger. Whipps was standing there, as cool in the face of death as he had been a few minutes before, arms half raised. The man was certainly no coward, Rossiter had to concede. Whipps was slow with a gun and he knew it. Rossiter was fast, but he held an empty gun—

He flung himself at Kreig, full in the muzzle of the gun as it swung at him. Kreig, a bigger man than Rossiter and strong as a horse—as he had demonstrated in lifting the dead cayuse—nevertheless went down under the sheer weight of Rossiter's rush. He managed to pull trigger twice, though—and was amazed to hear nothing but a couple harmless clicks!

Whipps meanwhile came instantly to Rossiter's aid. And with Whipps' loaded gun in his face, Kreig wilted suddenly, the fight went out of him.

"You sure took a long chance, Bill, jumpin' him that way," Whipps cried. "Even if that gun did have a lucky breakdown."

Rossiter straightened, shook his head.

"Wasn't much of a gamble that time," he denied. "You see, Kreig swiped that gun from me this morning. It looks right pretty and seems to work all right. But I had left it out, fixin' to do some work on it. The firin' pin has been broken off, so that it won't explode a shell. That didn't show very easy, and Kreig wanted to do the killing here with it, since folks would know that it was one of my guns—but that time he overreached himself."

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *How did river boatmen mend leaks in bull boats?*
2. *What Western exhibitions visited the East before the era of traveling rodeos?*
3. *What is the difference between a sneak boat and a skunk boat?*
4. *Is rattlesnake grass so named because it is a lurking place for rattlesnakes?*
5. *How did Indians preserve the scalps which they had taken?*
6. *Did border smugglers send messages by homing pigeons?*
7. *Did settlers on the Western plains encourage bats to live near them?*
8. *What are four reasons why cowboys wear chaps?*
9. *Why do Indians prefer black sombreros to those of a bright color?*
10. *Do houses sometimes explode in Western tornados?*

Answers on page 162

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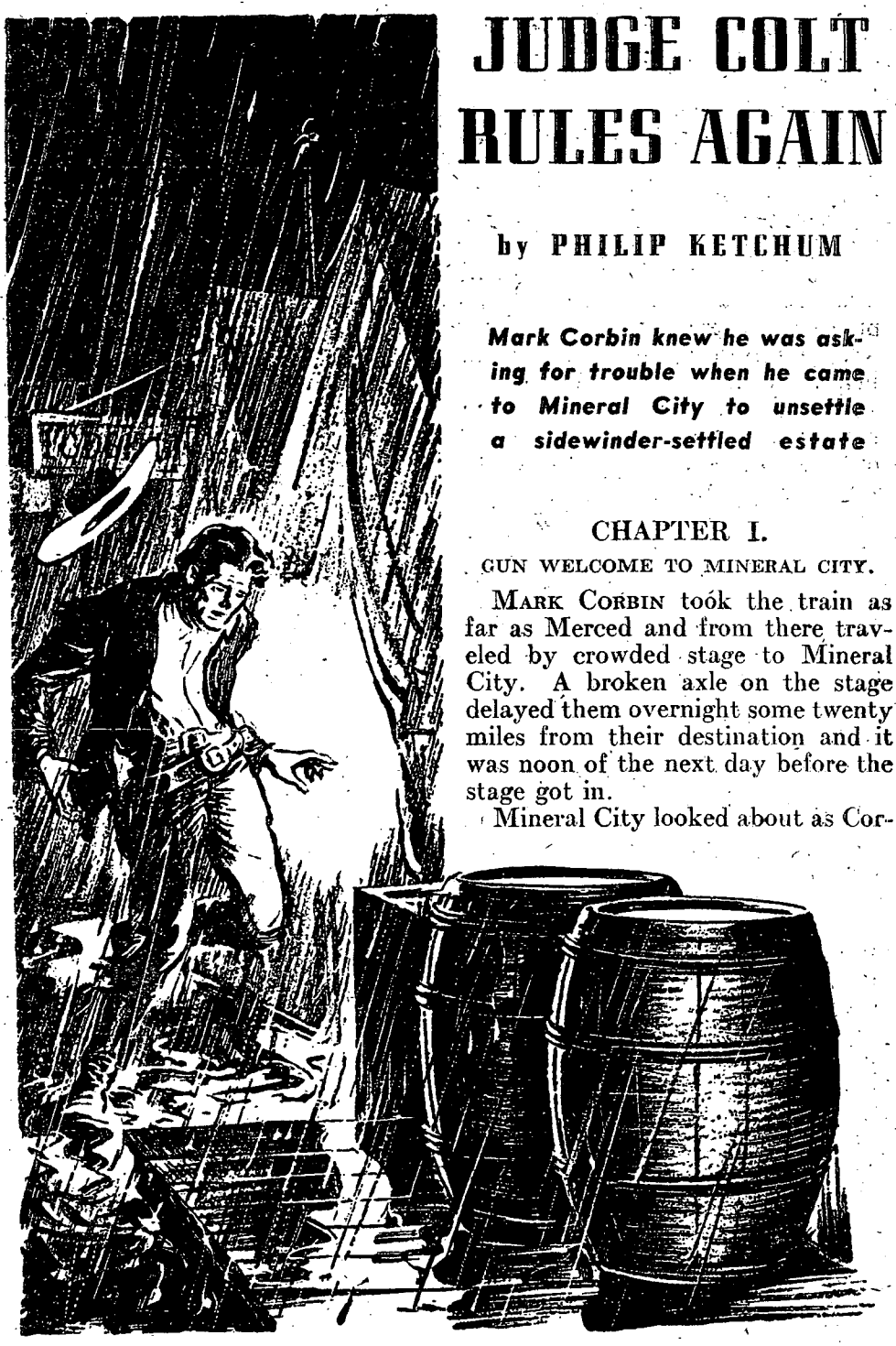

JUDGE COLT RULES AGAIN

by PHILIP KETCHUM

Mark Corbin knew he was asking for trouble when he came to Mineral City to unsettle a sidewinder-settled estate

CHAPTER I.

GUN WELCOME TO MINERAL CITY.

MARK CORBIN took the train as far as Merced and from there traveled by crowded stage to Mineral City. A broken axle on the stage delayed them overnight some twenty miles from their destination and it was noon of the next day before the stage got in.

Mineral City looked about as Cor-

The hot tongue of flaming lead barely missed Corbin, back in the tent camp.

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bin had expected it would. Set deep in the mountains, it had passed its mushroom stage, and the tent structures of its early days had given way to more substantial buildings, many of them still unpainted and new-looking. Its main street even boasted a boardwalk in front of its stores.

The usual crowd gathered at the hotel and stage office as the stage pulled in. A good many of the men wore the rough clothing of miners—heavy boots, serviceable trousers and thick shirts. A few, Corbin noticed, bore the unmistakable mark of the range country, and there were some in-store suits which would have passed in Denver. He saw very few women.

The passengers who had come on the stage quickly mingled with the crowd and went their various ways. Corbin picked up his bag, which the stage driver had unloaded, and pushed his way toward the front door of the hotel. Inside, he registered, listing his home as Tarboe, Texas, and after that he moved out to the hotel porch, and stood there for a time, looking up and down the street.

He was a tall young man with a thin, tight-skinned face that sun and wind had tanned almost to the coloring of an Indian. He had grave, thoughtful eyes and a sober expression that made him seem older than his twenty-four years. He wore a dark, ready-made suit and he felt uncomfortable in it.

A WRINKLED, old prospector edged up to his side and touched him on the arm.

"You lookin' for a claim, mister?" the oldster asked. "If you are, Frank Zang's got just what you want. One of the richest chunks of land in these here mountains. For sale dirt cheap, too. Course it'll take hard work to handle it but you don't look like you'd be afraid of hard work. Now this land—"

"Sorry, old-timer," Corbin grinned. "I wouldn't be interested."

The old man blinked. "You don't look like no drummer. I thought maybe—"

On down the street Corbin could make out a sign which read: ROCKY MOUNTAIN SALOON. Several men were pushing through its doors, others were coming out. There were maybe a dozen other saloons along the street, but the Rocky Mountain was obviously getting most of the business. A wide, frame structure, it seemed to reach far back from the main street.

"You're sure you wouldn't be interested, huh?" said the old prospector mournfully.

Mark Corbin shook his head, left the hotel porch and moved down the street toward the Rocky Mountain. On the way, two other men stopped him and tried to interest him in mining claims but Corbin broke quickly away from them. He reached the Rocky Mountain and stepped inside.

The long, pine-board bar that ran along the north wall of the building was crowded with men, and four perspiring bartenders worked behind it. The rest of the room was cluttered up with tables where poker, chuck-a-luck, twenty-one, fan-tan and other dice and card games were in progress. The air of the room was heavy with the smell of smoke and liquor, and a babble of voices made casual conversation almost impossible.

Corbin found a place at the bar, ordered a drink and, when the bartender wasn't busy for a moment, called him over. "Where'll I find Jim Bent?" Corbin inquired.

The bartender mopped a hand

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over his bald head. "Out south of town, mister, there's a little hill with crosses on it. If you want to see Jim Bent you'll have to find the cross with his name an' then dig."

As though immensely pleased at his joke, the bartender roared with laughter.

"You mean he's dead?" Corbin asked.

"Yep. He's dead plenty."

Corbin worked hard to keep the surprise out of his face. "Then who's running this Rocky Mountain Saloon?" he asked.

Doc Hamish. Maybe he's back in his office, over there 'cross the room. But he don't need no dealers, mister, an' right now's a bad time to bother him if it ain't important."

Corbin finished his drink and turned away from the bar. He made his way to the rear of the saloon and caught sight of a door back there marked: OFFICE—KEEP OUT. After a momentary hesitation he stepped up to the door and knocked.

"Come on in," barked a voice from the room beyond.

Corbin opened the door and stepped through it.

THERE were three men in the office. One was a huge, thick-bodied man who must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. His body overflowed the chair in which he sat. He had a round, ruddy face, so fat that his eyes were almost buried in it, and he seemed to have no neck at all. He wore a flowered vest and under it a blue silk shirt, not too clean. His trousers were dark.

The two men with him were sprawled in chairs near where the fat man was sitting. Both of them wore guns, and one had a marshal's star pinned to his suspenders. They looked forty, hard, lean and capable and they both eyed Corbin rather sharply.

"What do you want?" asked the man at the desk.

"Doc Hamish?" Corbin inquired.

The fat man nodded.

Corbin closed the door. "I'm Lou Ordman's nephew," he said slowly. "About a month ago I had a letter from a man named Jim Bent. He said that Lou had been killed and that, according to the will, the Rocky Mountain Saloon was mine. As soon as I could get away I came up here."

A deep silence followed that statement of Corbin's. The two men with Hamish had stiffened, and one of them got to his feet and looked at Hamish. Hamish shook his head. The expression on the fat man's face hadn't changed. It told Corbin nothing at all.

"What's your name?" Hamish asked.

"Mark Corbin."

"An' you're Lou Ordman's nephew?"

"Yes."

Hamish glanced at the other two men. "I didn't know Ordman had any relatives," he said slowly. "Come to think of it I once heard him say he didn't have any folks at all."

The man wearing the star nodded. "That's right, Doc."

Corbin was aware of a sudden, deep anger but he held it in check. "A thing like my relationship to him can be proven," he said quietly.

The fat man's shoulders moved in what might have been a shrug. "Maybe so. Go right ahead, Corbin. Prove anything you want."

"Who's running the Rocky Mountain right now?"

"I am," said Doc Hamish.

"By what right?"

"Why, son, when Lou Ordman died he owed me a right smart wad of money. The court figgered that

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the Rocky Mountain Saloon would just about pay it off."

Corbin moistened his lips. "Jim Bent wrote me different. He said the Rocky Mountain was clear. He said Lou Ordman didn't owe a thing."

"Then I reckon he lied, Corbin."

"Or someone else lied."

The man with the star moved over to where Corbin was standing and tapped him on the shoulder. "You'd better be a little more careful, Corbin," he said flatly. "I don't stand for stuff like that in Mineral City—especially from a stranger. It's like Doc says. Lou Ordman owed him money an' the Rocky Mountain just about squared things. Tough, but that's how it is."

Corbin glanced at the marshal. He looked at the other man, too, then turned his eyes toward Hamish. He was thinking of Jim Bent. On the few occasions that his uncle had visited them, Jim Bent had always accompanied him. Jim had been a tall, thin, silent man with a rare smile which sometimes lit up his whole face. Corbin had once heard his father and his uncle talking about Jim Bent.

"He's a gambler, sure," Lou Ordman had admitted, "but he's the most honest man I ever knew in my life. I never heard him tell a lie, even when a lie might have saved him a lot of trouble. He hasn't had a pretty life, maybe, but there's one thing he's got that most men haven't: a streak of honor that's as deep as the sky."

"Sorry, son," Doc Hamish was saying. "Too bad you came way up here all for nothin'. If you need a stake to get home I'll be glad to let you have it."

Mark Corbin shook his head. "I'm not going home—for a while."

"Think maybe you'll try your hand at mining?"

"Nope, I think I'll go hunting."

"Bear, son?"

Corbin looked the fat man straight in the eye. "Skunk."

A flush of anger showed in Hamish's face. He straightened up in his chair and then leaned forward a little. "Corbin," he said heavily, "I can take a joke as well as any other man but I don't like things like you just said. Get out of my sight an' get out of Mineral City, too. This town's a little tough on smart-Aleck gents."

Corbin shrugged. He turned to the door and opened it and then looked around at the three men. "You've told me nearly all that I wanted to know, Hamish," he nodded. "But it just happens that I like tough towns. I've got a notion that I'll be seeing you again."

CHAPTER II.

GUNFIRE STOKER.

THE main room of the saloon seemed noisier than it had a few moments before, and the crowd at the bar seemed to have grown. As Corbin headed for the street door he noticed the games that were going on. Nearly every table seemed loaded with money. Even at a fair percentage, he decided, Hamish must be almost coining money in this saloon.

From the Rocky Mountain, Corbin angled across the street to a restaurant. He had his dinner and then walked back to the hotel and sat on the porch, smoking a cigarette and idly watching the people who were moving up and down the street.

It wasn't hard to figure things out. Following Lou Ordman's death, Jim Bent had started to run the Rocky Mountain Saloon and had

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written the letter Corbin had in his pocket. Then either by chance or design, Jim Bent had been killed and Doc Hamish had moved in. He had perhaps produced notes which he must have claimed were signed by Lou Ordman. And undoubtedly the court had recognized them. That meant, of course, that Doc Hamish cut quite a figure in Mineral City and was a man to be reckoned with.

The man wearing the marshal's star came up the street and mounted to the hotel porch. He stopped at Corbin's chair. "There's a stage at six," he said bluntly. "Be on it."

Corbin looked up. "Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"And if I don't make it?"

"There's plenty of room up on the hill where we planted Jim Bent."

Corbin dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "Room enough for you an' Doc Hamish, too?"

The lawman drew in a sharp breath. "Be on that stage," he said again.

The marshal was a tall, thin man with angular features, and he wore his gun strapped low on his leg. There was an ugly scar along the side of his neck, and his eyes were a cold, frosty blue. He reminded Corbon of a marshal he had seen in Abeline, a cold-blooded killer who made and enforced the laws that suited his own fancy.

Corbin reached for his tobacco and papers and fashioned another cigarette, shaping it very deliberately. The marshal watched him, scowling. He started to say something else then apparently changed his mind, stepped back to the boardwalk and continued on up the street.

Corbin got to his feet and crossed over to a small building where he had noticed an attorney's office. He stepped inside, and the man at the desk looked up, nodded and asked what Corbin wanted.

"I have a charge to bring against a man named Doc Hamish," Corbin said bluntly. "Will you take it?"

The man frowned. He was a little man with thin, gray hair and dark nervous eyes. He ran his tongue over his lips. "What kind of a case?" he asked cautiously. "That is—"

Corbin shook his head. "Never mind. I'll try someone else."

He went outside and walked on down the street. He passed two offices where mining attorney's had hung out their signs and came to a stop before another place which had painted on the door: THOMAS J. LEOFFLER, ATTORNEY AT LAW. Pushing open the door, he stepped inside.

A MAN of about his own age was seated at a desk in this office. He was thin, almost haggard, and there was little color in his face. He had a shock of sandy hair and blue eyes, and was wearing a huge diamond ring. He shook his head as Corbin entered.

"No, it can't be," he muttered. "It can't possibly be that here comes some business. Stranger, you must have the wrong place if you want an attorney. Or maybe you're lost and want to know the nearest way to civilization. It's east, stranger. East about two thousand miles."

Corbin grinned. He couldn't help it. "East or south, Leoffler. There's some pretty nice civilization south of here."

"Impossible."

"I've just come from there."

"Why?"

"To see a man named Jim Bent, but when I got here I discovered that I had to deal with a fellow named Hamish."

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"The octopus."

"No, the skunk."

Leoffler shrugged. "One and the same thing. Maybe it depends on your point of view. As I see it, Doc Hamish is an octopus with a strangle hold on every part of Mineral City. Maybe you don't like the way he smells."

"How do you fight an octopus?"

"You struggle vainly until it kills you."

Mark Corbin reached into his pocket and drew out Jim Bent's letter. He passed it over to Leoffler and then watched as the man read it. Leoffler's face grew quite serious and finally tightened into a scowl. When he finished, Leoffler whistled and then handed back the letter.

"What do I do?" Corbin asked.

Leoffler got to his feet. "If you're wise, you get out of town as fast as you can. That's a ticket to boothill you just handed me, Corbin. I think it's true, every word of it, but there's not a thing in the world to be done. I wish—"

A sudden spell of coughing broke off what Leoffler was saying. He leaned over his desk and fought it, perspiration oozing out on his forehead. After a minute he lifted a handkerchief to his lips. When he took it away it was red-stained. In spite of the pain he must have endured, he was grinning again when he looked up at Corbin.

"A few more months," he mentioned, "or maybe only a few weeks. This high altitude was supposed to help but I don't think it has."

CORBIN didn't know what to say. He had a notion that what Leoffler had told him was true. The man's lungs were just about gone.

Leoffler crossed over to the window. "Come here," he called. "I'll show you what I mean."

Corbin joined him and Leoffler pointed up the street. "There's twenty, maybe thirty, business houses along this street," Leoffler started. "That is, if you count saloons. Offhand, I'd say that Hamish owns most of 'em outright. Most of the rest he either leases or holds mortgages on. Around in the hills are a dozen mines, half of 'em controlled by the Capitol Mining Co., another name for Doc Hamish. We've got a marshal here by the name of Sam Saltenstall, who belongs to Hamish, body and soul. And we've a judge who consults Doc Hamish before he gives any decision on any case. Corbin, if Doc Hamish don't want you to breathe the air around here you'd better not breathe it."

"What about Lou Ordman?"

"Lou Ordman fought him, Corbin. Or maybe I should say that Ordman held out against him. And Doc Hamish hated it. He hated the very sight of the Rocky Mountain Saloon. It was too popular with the men. It took in too much of the money that should have gone to him. So one night Ordman was killed. According to Sam Saltenstall, he was shot by a miner who had lost a lot of money in the Rocky Mountain and who very conveniently escaped."

"And Jim Bent?"

"Jim Bent died the same way."

"Maybe it wasn't a miner who shot Lou Ordman."

"Maybe, but try and prove it."

Mark Corbin wiped a hand over his face. He had imagined he would be up against something pretty tough, but never anything like this.

"Shucks, Corbin," Leoffler grunted. "A fellow like you doesn't want to run the Rocky Mountain. You belong out in the open, not in a hole like that."

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Corbin nodded his head. "I didn't ever mean to run it. I got a ranch down in Texas, as pretty a ranch as you ever saw. I wouldn't trade an acre of it for all of Mineral City."

"Then go back there."

"I mean to, but I need the money I could get for the Rocky Mountain. It's like this, Leoffler. When Lou Ordman came up here to start the Rocky Mountain my father slapped a mortgage on the ranch to give him a start, so in a way, what Ordman left was coming to us, anyhow."

Leoffler went back to his desk and sat down. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Leoffler. I thought maybe you could tell me."

"I *have* told you. Suppose I took your case to court. If you lived long enough to see it come to trial, this is what would happen. The judge would rule that Doc Hamish's notes were legal and that the value of the Rocky Mountain didn't more than equal them. You wouldn't get a cent."

"Will you take the case, anyhow?"

Leoffler grinned. "Sure. What have I got to lose? I can build a fire, Corbin. No telling what it'll smoke out. Where are you staying?"

"At the hotel."

"Terrible rooms. There's a place up the hill. Mrs. Ryan's. Drop by later and I'll take you up there."

MARK CORBIN nodded and turned to the door. As he moved outside he caught sight of one of the men he had seen in Hamish's office, the one who hadn't worn a star. He was lounging against a building across the street. When Corbin headed for the hotel the man followed him.

Corbin's bag was out on the front porch with several others. The hotel proprietor had just set it there. He straightened up, as Corbin reached the porch, and managed a feeble smile. "Sorry you're leavin' us so soon."

Corbin scowled. "Who said I was leaving?"

"The marshal dropped by. He said you was goin' on the six-o'clock stage. Ernie, the driver, likes to load up early so I brought your bag out with the others. Here's Sam now."

The marshal had stopped on the boardwalk near the hotel porch, his cold, blue eyes fastening on Corbin's face. There was a tension in his manner, an invitation to start something. Corbin wanted to step down to the walk and smash his fist into the marshal's face. It was all he could do to hold himself steady.

"Be sure an' get those bags on the stage, Joe," said the marshal. "All of them."

The hotel man nodded.

Mark Corbin stooped over. He lifted his bag and, without another glance at either the hotel man or the marshal, stepped down to the walk. Of a man on the street he asked the way to Mrs. Ryan's, listening carefully to the fellow's directions. Then he set off to find the place. He didn't look around but he could feel the marshal's eyes following him, and for quite a distance he had a funny, tense feeling in his back. It was as though every muscle there was drawn tight against the possible shock of a bullet.

CHAPTER III.

TENT TRIGGERS.

MARK CORBIN'S father had died quite suddenly about a year before, and at twenty-three, in the face of a falling cattle market, young Corbin had been left with the job of

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handling a thousand-acre ranch in the Texas panhandle. He hadn't had very easy going, and time and again he had faced the temptation of writing his uncle for a part payment on the loan his father had made him.

But he hadn't done that—and he had been glad that he hadn't when Jim Bent's letter reached him. It made him feel a little better about accepting the estate left by his uncle's will. It had never been in his mind to run the Rocky Mountain Saloon. He had planned to sell it, to make the best deal that he could; and he had hoped that the money it would bring might make things a little easier on the ranch until the cattle market picked up again.

Corbin was thinking of that as he trudged up the hill toward Mrs. Ryan's, and he was thinking, too, of the advice Leoffler had given him and of the marshal's order to get out of town. There was a good deal of logic in all that the lawyer had told him. Corbin had a pretty clear conception of what he was up against. He was sensible enough to be a little afraid, but there was a stubbornness in him that held him here. He might get along without what he could realize on the sale of the saloon, he knew. It would be hard going but he could make it. On the other hand, the price the Rocky Mountain would bring could make things a lot easier down home; and Corbin couldn't overlook that.

Mrs. Ryan turned out to be a middle-aged widow woman whose husband had been killed during the early days of Mineral City. He had left her destitute, but with a characteristic energy Mrs. Ryan had managed to get hold of a few tents as men abandoned them for better lodgings, and she had set them up near her cabin on the slope south of town. The tents she rented to newcomers to Mineral City, including meals in the price she charged. Better meals, she told Corbin, than you could buy in any restaurant within a thousand miles.

In the tent which Mrs. Ryan rented him, Corbin opened his bag. His gun belt, gun and holster were packed there. Corbin took them out, strapped the belt around his waist and practiced the draw his father had taught him. It was lightning swift. He didn't fire the gun, but he knew that he could hit any mark that he wanted within fifty yards. Learning how to handle a gun had been a part of his early training.

After a momentary hesitation, Corbin packed his gun away. The time hadn't come to use it. A man in his position, wearing a gun, would seem to be looking for a showdown. Corbin wasn't yet ready for that.

The supper bell sounded from the cabin at six, and at Mrs. Ryan's table, Corbin met several other men and a tall, dark-haired girl who was introduced as Thelma Ryan, Mrs. Ryan's daughter. Thelma stared at him with an ill-concealed animosity which Corbin couldn't understand.

There was one empty chair at the table. Bill Leoffler's. And probably since he wasn't here, there was a little talk about him. Leoffler seemed to be pretty popular with these men.

After the meal, Corbin took a short walk. What Leoffler could do Corbin didn't know. In the end it might be wholly impossible to prove that the notes Doc Hamish had showed the court hadn't been legal. And though Corbin might suspect that his uncle and Jim Bent had been murdered, there seemed to be little chance of proving that.

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CORBIN got back to his tent just at dusk. As he reached it he paused a moment and saw Mrs. Ryan's daughter hurrying up from the main part of town. She caught sight of him and turned his way. She was obviously excited, and as she came up to him he could almost feel the anger that had gripped her.

"He's dead," she said thickly. "Do you hear me? Dead. You might as well have killed him yourself. If it hadn't been for you—"

Corbin caught the girl's arm. "Who's dead? You don't mean—"

"Bill. Bill Leoffler."

Corbin could hardly believe her. The shock of those words went straight through him. "How do you know Leoffler's dead?" he heard himself asking.

"I was afraid of what had happened to him when he didn't come to supper. I stopped in to see him after you saw him this afternoon. He told me why you were here and what he was going to do. I asked him not to. I . . . I think I knew what would happen. After supper I went down to his office. He was lying on the floor. His head—"

The girl's voice choked up, she bit her lips. There were tears in her eyes.

"Doc Hamish?" Corbin asked tensely.

"Or one of his men. What difference does it make? He's dead. Maybe he wouldn't have lived long, anyhow, but he was the finest man I ever knew."

It was growing darker and a chill rain had started. Corbin drew in a long, slow breath. His mind called up a picture of Bill Leoffler's grin, the sound of his voice as Leoffler had said, "Sure I'll take your case. What have I got to lose?" He had had nothing to lose. Nothing but his life!

"Do you know what he said to me?" Thelma Ryan asked. "He said, 'Girl, I've got one more good fight left in me and I'm going to jump into this thing with both feet. I'm not going to charge Hamish with stealing the Rocky Mountain Saloon. I'm going to charge him with the murder of Lou Ordman and Jim Bent. I'm going to hit as hard as I can. I promised Corbin a fire and he's going to see one.' "

Mark Corbin wiped a hand over his face. Out on the road, over the girl's shoulder, he could see the figures of several men coming up from the main part of town. The murmur of their voices reached him and then their words.

"You're sure we'll find him up here, Sam?" some man was asking. "Why wouldn't he get outa town?"

"Maybe he didn't think we'd find Leoffler's body so soon." Corbin recognized the marshal's voice giving this answer.

"What's his name, anyhow?"

"Corbin. You fellows sorta spread out, will you?"

Thelma Ryan had turned and was looking toward the men. Mark Corbin cursed silently. So this was Hamish's answer to Corbin's refusal to leave town. Leoffler had been killed and Corbin was to be charged with Leoffler's murder. Or probably not just charged with it. Probably he was to be "killed in attempting to get away."

Almost as though in answer to that thought, the marshal's voice was heard again. "Keep your hands on your guns, boys. Remember, this man we're after is a killer."

There were close to a dozen men in the crowd beginning to spread out fan-shaped between Mrs. Ryan's tents and the rest of the town. The flap of Corbin's tent was open, and he and Thelma hadn't been seen, he

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guessed, because they stood almost in the tent entrance.

"You'll . . . have to get away," Thelma said under her breath. "Those men—"

Corbin stepped swiftly farther into the tent. He opened his bag, drew out his gun belt and buckled it around his waist. The heavy weight of the gun and holster against his leg was reassuring.

"Hurry," Thelma was calling. "One of them's gone to the house. Mother will tell them where you are."

AWARE of a throbbing excitement, Corbin moved back outside. He stared toward Mrs. Ryan's and saw the front door open and the marshal standing in the light of it, talking to someone in the house. To his left and toward the town he could make out several vague figures, the nearest of which was pretty close.

"Slip around the tent," Thelma whispered. "Back of it—"

Corbin shook his head. He started directly toward the nearest man, who saw him almost at once, lifted his gun and fired. The hot tongue of flaming lead barely missed Corbin.

Raising his hands, he called out: "What's goin' on here? Who are you an' what do you want?"

"You know a gent named Corbin who just moved out here?" asked the man with the gun.

"Sure," Corbin answered. "He's up at the house. Went up there just a minute ago."

All this time Corbin had been moving forward. As he spoke the man facing him jerked a quick glance at the house, and Corbin lunged forward. He heard the roar of a gun in his ear and the man's voice raised in a sharp cry of alarm. Then his shoulder caught the man in the chest and sent him reeling backward.

Corbin straightened up, moved after the man, swinging a long, looping right to the jaw. The man went down. Corbin didn't stop, for the shot and the man's cry had caught the attention of the others. The marshal was racing from the house, shouting orders, as Corbin lit out down the hill. He heard the spatter of shots following him, and though he knew how hard it was to hit a figure racing through the shadows of the night, he expected every moment to feel the shock of a bullet.

Forty yards ahead were several houses. Corbin reached them and

ducked out of sight of the men who were following him. After he had passed the first house he turned down the hill again. A dog came tearing out of some yard and started barking at his heels and nipping at him, but the shots and the cries of the men who were after him had roused other dogs, too.

Corbin swung around another house and came out behind the buildings lining the main street. He

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stopped running. To his left, just a little ways, was the Rocky Mountain Saloon. When he had been in the office of Doc Hamish he had noticed a back door, and he headed that way now, reached the door and knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door but it was locked.

Behind him, Corbin could hear the voices of many men. They seemed to be making a systematic search as they came down the hill, and they weren't very far away. Corbin moved along to the far corner of the building. He had a notion that word that the marshal was after him wasn't yet very generally known. It would be the marshal's way to corner him and shoot him down before making the charge against him too public. That way, there was little danger that Corbin would be captured, or that he could prove he had nothing to do with Leoffler's death.

Counting heavily on this, Mark Corbin moved along the wall of the building to the main street and over to the saloon door. He stepped inside and headed back toward the door of Hamish's office. Sounds of firing up on the hill might have drawn away some of the saloon's customers; but the bar and gambling tables were still crowded, and no one seemed to pay any particular attention to Corbin as he crossed the room.

He reached the office door, knocked on it and then, as though having had an answer, reached down and twisted the knob. This door from the saloon wasn't locked. Corbin opened it and stepped inside. A wall lamp was burning but there was no one in the room. Corbin closed the door and leaned against it. His face was suddenly covered with perspiration and his knees felt shaky. After a minute he crossed over to Hamish's chair and sat down.

CHAPTER IV.

COLT COURT.

A LOW, murmur of noise reached into this room from the saloon now and then, rising in pitch as the crowd at the bar laughed at some story. Mark Corbin rolled a cigarette and lit it. He stared at Hamish's desk, then on an abrupt impulse, started searching it. He had the vague notion that he might find something to help him. He was wrong. He was just finishing his search when he heard the sound of the doorknob turning; and then as the door opened a crack, there came the sound of Hamish's voice, in conversation with some man in the saloon.

Mark Corbin came swiftly to his feet. He moved over to the wall and stood rigidly against it where the opening door would hide him from the man coming in. Hamish finished his talk, pushed the door wider and came into the room. He closed it—and then went rigid when he saw who was here. Corbin's gun was out and was covering him.

"I told you I'd be back," Corbin said quietly. "Maybe you didn't expect me, though, Hamish. Maybe you thought I'd be finished by this time."

Doc Hamish moistened his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Suppose we go back then, Hamish. Suppose we talk about how you wanted the Rocky Mountain Saloon so badly that you had Lou Ordman murdered, then when Jim Bent got in the way you had him killed, too. I suppose you thought that with them gone no one would ever question the notes you used to claim the place. But

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as it happened, I showed up, and when I wouldn't scare and when you heard what Leoffler was starting, you tried the same trick again. You had him killed and then gave your marshal orders to shoot me down as the murderer."

Doc Hamish shook his head. "A pack of lies. You need money an' you expected to get it here. When that scheme fell through you went to see Leoffler and noticed the flashy diamond ring he was wearing. You had to kill him to get it."

Corbin's eyes narrowed. "So that's it. A ring."

"That's what the marshal tells me."

"Hamish, who's the judge in this town?"

"A fellow named Asbury."

"Send for him."

"Huh?"

"Move right back to that door, open it, call some man and tell him to go and get Asbury and bring him here. And don't say another word to the man you call. Just send for the judge."

"What do you want with the judge?"

"Get him, Hamish. I don't know whether a bullet could get through your thick body or not, but if you don't move fast I'm going to find out."

Doc Hamish hesitated for just a moment. Then, as Corbin's hand tightened on his gun, the fat man stepped to the door and opened it. He looked into the saloon and called, "Hey, Red. Go find Judge Asbury an' tell him I want to see him right away."

Closing the door, then, he looked back at Corbin.

"You're not through," Corbin stated. "We need more of a crowd than the judge. Open the door again. Send someone for the marshal. And send for Mrs. Ryan and her daughter, too."

"Mrs. Ryan and her daughter!"

"Yep, an' hustle—I'm gettin' impatient!"

HAMISH stepped to the door and gave the orders and afterward closed it and crossed over to his desk. He kept his eyes on Corbin.

"This isn't gonna get you any place," Hamish declared. "By now, half the town knows what you've done an' what you look like. You'll never in the world get away from here."

Mark Corbin shrugged. "Sit down, Hamish. If anyone knocks say you're busy an' tell 'em to go away. When the judge gets here, with the marshal and the Ryans, ask 'em to come in."

"Can I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

Hamish fingered a cigar from the pocket of his coat. He put it in his mouth but didn't light it. Corbin stood near the door, waiting, his gun never lowering an inch. When there was a knock on the door Hamish hesitated, then called that he was busy, and whoever had knocked went away. A few moments later there was another knock. This time it was the judge. He came in and stiffened at the sight of Corbin and the gun in Corbin's hand.

Mark Corbin kicked the door shut. "Have a chair, judge," he suggested. "Take that one to the left of Hamish—an' maybe you'd better keep your hands folded in your lap."

Judge Asbury was a short, round-shouldered man with a rather pale face. "Wh-what's all this about?" he asked huskily.

Corbin grinned. "We're gonna have a trial, judge. Maybe a crazy

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sort of a trial but at least it's gonna be honest."

The judge gulped. He sat down in the chair Corbin had indicated and folded his hands in his lap. A trickle of perspiration crawled down his forehead.

Mrs. Ryan and Thelma came next, an angry defiance in their attitudes as they entered the room. The man who had been sent after them followed. Just as the judge, he stiffened at the sight of Corbin's gun.

"Get 'em up, fella," Corbin snapped.

The man's hands jerked into the air and he edged along the wall. He was a tall man with bowed legs and a shock of sandy hair that fell over his forehead. His face was long and thin.

"You're Corbin, ain't you?" he guessed.

Mark Corbin nodded.

"I thought a lot of Bill Leoffler. That gun'll never get you out of here."

"We'll worry about that later," Corbin answered. "Right now, just hold up that wall an' keep your hands where I can see them."

Thelma and her mother both seemed stunned to find Corbin here. The anger that had shown in their faces when they entered was gone.

"You two women stand over there by the back door," Corbin suggested. "I'll not keep you here long. As soon as the marshal comes we'll get started."

"Started on what?" asked the man who had brought the Ryans.

"On my trial for murder," Corbin replied. "I've an idea it's gonna be interesting."

A thoughtful look had come over the face of Doc Hamish. He lifted a hand to the top button of his vest. Corbin noticed that and shook his head at the man. He had a notion Hamish must be packing a gun in a shoulder holster.

Someone knocked on the door and the marshal's voice called, "Hey, Doc. It's me."

Hamish took the cigar out of his mouth. "Come on in," he growled.

THE door opened and the marshal stepped into the room. He saw the judge and the two women and the man who stood against the wall before his eyes fell on Corbin. A look of surprise froze on the lawman's face as Corbin spoke.

"Take that other chair, marshal," Corbin ordered. "The one next to Hamish. An' maybe you'd better clasp your hands back of your head an' keep 'em there."

For an instant Corbin was sure the marshal wasn't going to follow that command. One of his hands was only inches away from his gun. Corbin could sense the heady impulse that was trying to drive the marshal to take a chance on drawing it. But the moment passed and the marshal raised his hands.

"Corbin," he said heavily, "there are five hundred men in this town who are after you. All I've got to do is raise my voice and the crowd in the saloon will bust through that door. You wouldn't have a chance."

"Then why don't you raise your voice?" Corbin asked harshly.

The marshal swallowed. He looked over at Hamish and then at the judge and then at the other man.

"Clasp your hands back of your neck an' sit down in that chair," Corbin snapped. "You can call in your wolves later, but first of all, I'm gonna have my say."

The marshal crossed over to the chair and sat down, but the tension that had been in his body was still there. He didn't slump in his chair

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as Hamish and the judge did. Every muscle was tight.

"Get on with your show, Corbin," said the man leaning against the wall.

Mark Corbin nodded. He knew exactly what he meant to do. Whether he could carry his plan through to the end or not, was something that he couldn't tell, but as he sized the whole situation up there seemed no other course to follow than this one.

"All right," he agreed. "I promised you a trial and that's just what you're gonna get. But before it starts, let me say this: I know as well as you do that I haven't got a chance outside this room. Now since all the chips are down like that, it doesn't make much difference to me just where the end comes. If you want to go for your guns you can get me. There's not much question about that. But there's not much question about something else, either. I'll take a few of you along if you start anything here. Think that over an' think it over pretty dang carefully."

No one in the room said a thing. Corbin's eyes slid from face to face. He was standing back where he could watch all of them.

"We'll get started, then," he said finally. "Judge, you can preside right from your chair, but I'll run things this time instead of Doc Hamish. This is the trial of Mark Corbin who is charged with the murder of Bill Leoffler—an' the first witness is going to be Thelma Ryan!"

CHAPTER V.

POWDER-SMOKE VERDICT.

AS Mark Corbin called the girl's name she came a step forward. Perhaps some conception of what he meant to do was in her mind, for there was a sparkle in her eyes and her face was flushed.

"Thelma," Corbin said, "you called on Bill Leoffler this afternoon just after I visited him. Just what did he tell you?"

"You mean—everything?"

"Yes."

The girl nodded. "He seemed quite excited. He said that a man named Mark Corbin had just been in to see him. He said you were Lou Ordman's nephew and that you had a letter from Jim Bent, written after Ordman's death and telling you that the Rocky Mountain Saloon was yours and that it was free of debt. Bill said that, without doubt, Doc Hamish had forged the notes he used to get control of the Rocky Mountain. He said he had one good fight left in him and that he was going to charge Doc Hamish with fraud and with the murder of Lou Ordman and Jim Bent. I didn't want Bill to. I was afraid of what might happen to him if he tried anything like that. He just laughed at me and left the office to go and see the judge."

The girl's voice had been quite clear. Corbin could see that the man leaning against the wall was very much interested in what she had said.

"When did you leave Leoffler's office, Thelma?"

"When he did. About half an hour before supper time."

"And when did you go back?"

"Right after supper. I found him—dead." Her voice was firm.

"I was at supper, wasn't I?"

"Yes."

"Could I have beat you down to Leoffler's office?"

"No, you were still at the house when I left."

"Mrs. Ryan, where was I during the hour before supper?"

Mrs. Ryan stepped forward to her

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daughter's side. "Right at my place," she answered bluntly.

Mark Corbin grinned. He said, "Judge, how's it going? Am I doing all right?"

The judge, biting his lips, took a quick glance at Doc Hamish. "This is very irregular," he stammered. "It ain't legal at all."

"Maybe not," Corbin answered. "And it's going to get more irregular. When I saw Bill Leoffler this afternoon he had a diamond ring on his finger. A few minutes ago, before any of the rest of you arrived, Doc Hamish told me that diamond ring was missing. He said it was going to be found on my body, that that was why I killed Leoffler. Maybe you won't believe that, but let's get this straight, anyhow. The diamond ring was really missing, wasn't it?"

Neither Hamish nor the judge had a word to say but the man leaning against the wall nodded. "That's what I heard, Corbin. Go ahead. This is beginning to get interesting."

"You can search me later," Corbin went on, "but I don't think it'll be necessary. The marshal can tell us where the diamond ring can be found, can't you, marshal? Or *I* can tell you! Right now the diamond ring is in one of the marshal's pockets. He was supposed to slip it in my pocket after I had been shot down."

THE marshal came slowly to his feet and lowered his hands until they were in front of his guns. His face was flushed with anger. His mouth was open, but he couldn't get any words out.

"Steady there, marshal," said the man who had been leaning against the wall. "If what Corbin says is true maybe we've got the wrong man on trial. Come to think of it, you never did like Bill Leoffler, did you?"

The marshal took a quick glance over his shoulder. The fellow who had been standing against the wall had moved out a little and had dropped his hands to his guns. There was a taut look on his face.

"We seem to be choosing up sides," Corbin announced flatly. "Judge, where do you stand? Are you still riding with Doc Hamish?"

The trickle of perspiration on the judge's face had become almost a stream. He was no more able to speak than the marshal.

"Thelma, maybe you and your mother had better get out of here," Corbin suggested. "And if you feel like it, you might walk around to the street and talk a little about what's going on. I've a notion Mineral City's gonna need a new marshal an' the Rocky Mountain's gonna be up for sale. Not by Hamish. It looks to me right now like Hamish was going to be dead pretty quick. That is, unless he talks up in a hurry an' says the proper things. You can unlock the back door an' go out that way."

Mrs. Ryan unlocked the back door, opened it and stepped outside. Thelma followed her. She looked back before she closed it, a worried expression on her face.

"What about that ring, marshal?" Corbin asked.

The marshal edged away from Doc Hamish and the judge. He had to in order to be able to see the man who had been behind him. There was a look of desperation in the lawman's face.

"Doc," he cried hoarsely. "Doc! You're in this, too. You—"

"Shut up, you fool," Hamish answered. "You found that ring when you searched Corbin's stuff out at Mrs. Ryan's."

The marshal took another step backward, as if he hadn't heard what

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Hamish said. His body froze, and then he was desperately clawing up his guns. He started pulling the triggers the minute they cleared the holsters, his first shots hitting the floor almost at Mark Corbin's feet. Corbin fired twice. He saw the marshal's body jerk and start to twist sideways and saw the gun that Hamish had jerked from his shoulder holster. It was lifting straight toward him. Even as he swung his own gun that way and fired, Corbin realized he was safe. The man who had brought the Ryans here stepped up behind Hamish and hit him heavily on the back of the head with a gun butt.

The fat man's body seemed to straighten out. It slid from the chair and rolled to the floor. Hamish fell half on top of the judge who, having taken refuge behind the desk, was squealing for help.

THEN help came. Men poured in from the front of the saloon, crowded around Corbin and clubbed him down, and there was immediate talk of a rope and of a lynching party. Then above all the clamor of those voices, Corbin heard the strident tones of Mrs. Ryan and the man who had brought the Ryans here. And pretty soon, what they were saying caught everyone's attention and the men holding Corbin down helped him to his feet.

Someone searched the marshal's body and found Leoffler's ring, and a few more men cornered the judge and the judge started babbling about what Doc Hamish had made him do, about the notes Hamish had claimed Ordman had signed.

"But I didn't have anything to do with Ordman's death," the judge protested. "Or Bent's, either. It was the marshal killed them. He—"

As though realizing he had said too much, the judge's voice choked off.

Mark Corbin pushed his way to the wall and leaned against it. He felt suddenly very tired. He didn't think he was going to have much trouble in Mineral City. Already, the judge and Doc Hamish, who had recovered from the blow over the head and who had been slightly wounded by Corbin's bullet, were being hauled away. Miner's justice was a swift and sure thing as soon as a case was clear.

The man who had brought the Ryans here came over to where Corbin was standing and held out his hand. "My name's McCracken," he mentioned. "You make a pretty good judge, Corbin. You wouldn't like to stay on here, would you, an' keep the job permanent?"

Corbin shook his head. "Soon as I can sell the Rocky Mountain it's Texas for me."

McCracken grinned. "Texas!" he cried. "Man, would I like to be back there again."

"Why not ride south with me?"

"Maybe I will," McCracken said.

Others crowded around them and there was a lot of talk, but as soon as he could Mark Corbin broke free. He left the Rocky Mountain to take care of itself for the night and headed toward the Ryans'. He wanted to thank Mrs. Ryan and her daughter for what they had done and he wanted to talk to Thelma about Bill Leoffler. There was the only bad spot in this whole affair. Bill had seemed like one fine hombre.

Thinking of him, Corbin trudged up the hill. A little distance ahead Mrs. Ryan and her daughter, who had seen him, were waiting. Mark Corbin caught sight of them and hurried.

THE END.

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BIG WINDIES

by S. OMAR BARKER

They asked me, "What's a windy?" It's a double-meanin' word.
You take them ornery cattle, when you're roundin' up a herd,
That hide out in the canyons—it's so hard to drive 'em out
That there ain't no cow hoss ever lived so rawhide tough an' stout
But what he's plumb exhausted by the time you've done the chore,
His lathered flanks a-heavin' till he just can't go no more.
So when such cows are gathered, that is why, you understan',
The cowboys call 'em windies—'cause they "wind" both hoss an' man.
But that ain't all a windy is. Most cowpokes love to spin
Their yarns around the campfire. Listen how them tales begin:

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"Well, boys, I'm goin' to tell you 'bout the time I hunted b'ar.
The fall work all was finished, so I took a *pasear*
'Way back up in the timber where the hoot owls have their fun,
To see if I could find some bear an' maybe shoot me one.
The trouble was the day was warm. I laid down for a nap.
I woke up late that evenin' when I heard a great big snap,
An' there beside me stood a bear—I tell you, boys, it's true—
This bear had took my rifle an' he'd snapped it right in two!

"He throwed the pieces at me as I shinnied up a tree,
Then give a grunt, spit on his hands an' clumb right after me.
By that time it was gittin' dark. I reached the topmost limb.
That bear kept right on comin', an' I knowed 'twas me or him.
Well, boys, that tree was mighty tall—a lucky thing, no doubt,
For by the time he got it clumb, ol' bruin's tongue was out.
A-lollin' through his slobbers, such a tongue you never see,
As purty, pink an' limber as a rubber singletree.

"That's what I grabbed a-holt of, an' I swang him round an' round
Until I yanked him inside out, then flang him to the ground.
But now this here's the funny part: I'd started down, when *wup!*
Here come that doggone bear again, a-climbin' right back up!
Looked like he'd somehow turned hisself plumb right side out once more.
All I could do was grab his tongue just like I'd done before,
An' yank him inside out again. I heard him hit the earth,
Then started squirlin' down that tree for all that I was worth.

"But, shucks, no sooner started down than, by the gobs I'll swear,
Tongue out an' climbin' fast again, here come that doggone bear!
Well, boys, it kept right on that way plumb till the break of day:
Ten times I yanked him wrong side out, but still he wouldn't stay.
At least that's what I figgered. But at gray dawn's early light
I saw what I'd been doin', boys, throughout the dark of night:
There lay upon the ground below—my word please do not doubt—
Not one, but *twelve* dead grizzly bears, all turned plumb wrong side out!"

Big windies, if you'd like to know, are tales the cowboys spin
To kinder kill the lonesomeness when night comes closin' in:
About the mighty Pecos Bill, with cyclones in his loop;
About the ring-tailed wowser an' the bob-wire-tailed kadoop.
They asked me, "What's a windy?" So I opened up an' told
The first one I could think of, though, of course, it's kinder old,
For many an oft-told windy of the well-knowed cow-range stamp
Ain't nothin' but a cowpoke huntin' grizzly bears—*in camp!*

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"Don't shoot, mister!" yammered the survivor, throwing away his gun as if it had become too hot to hold.

BULLET ACES TO BEAT

by PAUL S. POWERS

It's Curly and Toot and Bill Barbee, those Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T—and they're headed out on a six-gun spree!

CHAPTER I.

COW THIEVES DE LUXE.

PULLED by its wheezing, hard-laboring little locomotive, the freight train crept up the narrow cliff-walled canyon at a pace not much faster than a man's walk. It was a narrow-gauge track, a short branch line of an out-of-the-way Wyoming railroad. The tiny engine, three box cars, four stock cars and caboose seemed like a string of toys. In a little while it would be at the crest of the Great Divide, with a downhill run into the mining town of Silver Dollar.

Back in the miniature red caboose

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men's voices were raised. It was one voice mostly—a roaring, foghorn one that rattled the dusty windows of the jerkily moving car and easily made itself heard over the grinding of the wheels and the loud panting of the engine.

"Call you! And I'm raisin' you four dollars!"

The voice belonged to a huge and mightily muscled man who was costumed for the cattle range, wearing a black-and-white cowhide vest and a pair of white Angora chaps that filled one of the car seats to overflowing. Across from him were the two trainmen—the pudgy little conductor and the tobacco-chewing brakeman. In the midst of the trio was an upended suitcase ornamented with bank notes and silver. The game was poker.

"I'll have to see you." The conductor sighed regretfully. "And I boost it another four. How about you, Ed?"

The brakeman inspected his cards. "*And* two," he decided, slapping some greenbacks onto the growing pile. "That'll cost you six dollars more for the bad news, Mr. Toot."

"Toot Smith is the name," the big ranny corrected boomingly. "Call me Toot if you want to, but when this game's over you'll be callin' me Mr. Smith! Here's the six dollars and I'm raisin' you back— Hey, Steve! Lend me ten dollars, will you? I got to back this here hand!"

He spoke to the other passenger, a trim, well-constructed youth in pearl-gray chaps, gray shirt faced with black, and black Stetson. This Steve was sitting apart from the others, and seemed to find the slowly passing scenery more interesting than draw poker. Steve was as quiet as Toot Smith was loud.

Now Curly Steve Tustin smiled, but shook his head. "Not in a card game, Toot. It's not the principle of the thing; it's the money. No go."

Toot snorted disgustedly, then voiced even more disapproval when he lost the pot—and the last of his money. His low straight had been third-best; the conductor had a flush and the brakeman had won with four treys. Toot again voiced his request for a cash loan, but Steve's smile only broadened.

"Nope," he said calmly. "You ought to let Bill Barbee do all the poker playin' for our spread, Toot."

"Beautiful Bill? He ain't in it with me as a poker player," Toot rumbled. "All that's the matter with you, you're tight, Steve—so tight you had to cut threads in your boots so you can screw 'em on in the mornings. This game ain't over," he told the trainmen fiercely as they started to put away their winnings. "How much will you let me have on *this?*" he demanded, pulling his big Colt .45 from its holster.

The railroaders were panicky for a moment, thinking that Toot meant to win the *sure* way, but when they saw that he was only trying to put up collateral, they agreed.

"All right, if you'll point it some other way, I'll let you have twenty dollars for it," said the brakeman, counting out the bank notes.

The game of draw continued, with Curly Steve Tustin watching it now with more interest. He knew that any attempt on his part to reason with his big pard would be worse than useless; he would just have to let the bullheaded waddy lose his gun. Steve would cheerfully give Toot his last dollar—but not, as he had said, in a card game.

SEVERAL more hands were played, while Toot went on complaining of Steve's stinginess. "Awful, that's what I calls it," he mumbled. "Here

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we are, the owners—along with Bill Barbee—of the finest and one of the biggest ranches in Wyomin'—the Rockin' T. And in them cars up ahead is the beef steers we'll be collectin' big dinero for in Silver Dollar town. A big, prominent rancher like me havin' to hock his gun! Why, it's disgustin'—outrageous!"

Curly Steve chuckled, knowing that Toot wasn't as proddy toward his pard as he pretended. And Toot's windy talk of the Rockin' T's magnificence was really funny. It was a good spread, of course, but the partners were holding on to their new possession only by the skin of their teeth. Every cent of the proceeds from this load of cattle was sorely needed. In fact, their keeping the Rockin' T depended upon the sale of the steers, pronto. Luckily, the beef had been contracted for at a top price.

Toot suddenly became conscious that the last of his final twenty dollars were in the pot for a showdown. But he grinned confidently at his cards.

"A full hand!" he bellowed. "Beat kings on tens if you can!"

"Sorry." The conductor sighed. "My aces on queens beats your filly, Mr. Toot . . . er . . . Smith."

"I been took—rippycacked!" howled Toot. "You durned box-car wranglers—"

"Wait a minute!" the conductor interrupted. "Somethin' is wrong with the train! We're at Apex Pass, the top of the Divide, and we're stopping. There ain't any stop scheduled here! And I thought I heard shots up ahead! I've got to find out—"

As the cars came to a jerking stop, the senior trainman clambered up into the square, glass-windowed cupola so that he could look ahead along the train. The brakeman and the two passengers started to open the caboose windows.

But before they could get an inkling of what was taking place, a harsh command was flung at them from the rear of the halted coach:

"All right, you leppies! Get your hands up before we splatter you all over the car! We're takin' charge here!"

Several men with leveled guns had burst in from the back platform. They had the drop, and judging from their bleak hard-rock features, they knew what to do with it! Anger shimmered in the dark eyes of Curly Steve as he sized up the situation, but he saw that there was nothing else to do but obey orders.

Toot Smith didn't take it so easily! With a roar like that of an out-of-tune steam calliope, he reached instinctively toward his empty holster. And when he remembered that he had lost his gun, his fury increased to wild rage. He would have hurled himself on the intruders if Steve hadn't blocked the big puncher's rush with his own body. Everything considered, it was lucky that Toot had parted company with his .45—he would have got himself killed, otherwise.

"What are you locoed galoots a-tryin' to do, anyhow?" Toot demanded when he had calmed enough to make his words clear.

That was something Curly Steve was wondering about, too. If it had been a passenger train carrying mail and express, he would have understood it, but this was a dinky little freight!

More men—Steve counted seven of them—could be seen and heard now alongside the tracks. At Apex Pass the canyon widened out considerably and split into three separate gulches, and there was a level space of some ten acres to the left

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of the train. To their amazement, the two Rockin' T men saw the bandits bringing some crude but effective ramps up to the stock cars. It was the *cattle* that these train robbers were after! This was something new, at least to Steve and Toot. The whole thing seemed crazy. And yet—those steers were worth several thousand dollars in any man's market.

While the trio of bandits held Toot, Steve and the railroaders at bay within the caboose, the rest of the gang unloaded the cattle with surprising speed and efficiency. The scrambling red horde of bawling steers were being collected by the mounted renegades and rounded up in a compact bunch. The sight, for Toot especially, was maddening.

"You low-down, sneakin', sidewindin' sons of rattlesnakes!" he bellowed deafeningly, just as another granite-jawed bandit entered the caboose. "I'll run you rustlers down if you go a thousand miles! And when I catch you—"

"Yeah?" sneered the newcomer, who seemed to be the leader of the outfit. "Seems to me that's purty big talk, even for an overgrown lunkhead like you. Tie up these jaspers, men—all four of 'em. Rope 'em to them seats."

"Just as you say, Andross," said a hatchet-faced buscadero.

"Quiet with the names," Andross rasped. "But I reckon it don't make much difference. These jaspers won't be talkative half an hour from now."

STEVE studied the gang boss while ropes were being brought in, for he had heard of Blacky Andross, reputed to be the most dangerous outlaw in that portion of the Rockies. He was a swarthy six-footer, dressed like a prosperous ranchman and wearing a brace of ivory-handled six-guns. His dished-out face was so gaunt as to be almost fleshless, and his thin lips and gray-green eyes gave it an expression of cruel ruthlessness. He walked back and forth on the rear platform while the prisoners were being trussed up—and made the blood-chilling announcement that the engineer and fireman had put up a fight and had been shot to death.

"But that won't keep this train from travelin' right on." He laughed sardonically, with a meaning that Steve was beginning to grasp. "Hey, you out there!" he shouted at the rustlers. "You got them cows ready to travel?"

"We can push 'em on any time, boss," came the reply.

Blacky Andross grinned his approval and thrust his head in at the caboose door. "When you've got 'em hogtied, we're startin'," he said. "Hurry it, Jake."

The sharp-faced bandit jerked tight the final knot that bound Toot Smith, wrists to ankles, closely against the heavy iron scroll that supported one of the caboose benches. Steve and the trainmen had been served similarly, but the bandits had taken their spite out on the big fellow. Every time Toot cussed them they had yanked harder on the hemp.

"You blasted hydrophoby skunks! I'll settle with the whole bunch of you when I catch—"

But Andross and his henchmen had already jumped from the caboose, and a few moments later the train began to move forward slowly. One of the bandits had released the locomotive brakes and opened the throttle!

Roped close to the floor, the prisoners were away from the windows and could see little, but they heard the rustlers yell derisively as the freight train slid slowly by them.

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Already, it seemed to be gathering momentum.

"We're done for, boys!" the conductor said, panting. "It's steep down grade from here to Silver Dollar! We'll jump the track as sure as shootin'! We ain't got the ghost of a chance!"

"That's so," groaned the brakeman. "Can any of you fellers get loose? I can't budge!"

Steve Tustin could do nothing; he had been tied too cleverly to the seat supports which were solidly bolted to the flooring of the car. And the ropes had been woven to withstand the terrific contest of steer versus horse—so the ropes certainly wouldn't give. The trainmen were right; they were hopelessly trapped in the runaway freight.

The train's pace had increased from a rate of five miles an hour to perhaps twenty, for Steve could hear the speeding up of the intervals between the clicks of the rail joints. It was a tune that began slowly, but gradually became a chant of death. The caboose had begun to sway drunkenly on the curves, and the wheels of the train, grinding ever more swiftly, howled and shrieked like things gone mad. Twenty miles an hour grew to thirty and then to thirty-five. On that treacherous mountain grade, with its sharp bends and turns, such velocity was deadly. And it was growing, moment by moment!

"They can't tie me up like this!" Toot blurted. "I won't allow it! I'm gettin' loose right now!"

Bracing his back against the car wall, the big ranny's arched body stiffened, and Steve could see the enormous muscles swelling and rippling beneath his shirt. Toot sweated; he panted through teeth that were set against the pain of the ropes that were cutting into his flesh. From time to time he grunted.

But he kept at it, and the heavy iron base of the bench bent, little by little—and finally snapped with a report like a pistol shot. Growling, Toot worked his hands and feet out of the loops of slackened rope, then stood swayingly erect.

"Untie me! Get us loose!" shrilled the pudgy little conductor.

Toot Smith looked at the prisoners and stubbornly shook his head in the negative. Then he jumped out onto the back platform of the caboose.

CHAPTER II.

DOWNHILL DRAG.

TOOT knew that long before he could untie the intricate knots that bound Steve and the railroaders, the train would jump the track in a tangle of wreckage. Stopping the train, or at least slowing it down, seemed the one and only bet. Seizing the brake wheel of the caboose, he whirled it mightily, tightening it until streams of sparks made a comet's tail behind the lurching train.

But the results were disappointing. The clicking of the rails was even more furious—it was like the castanets of the devil. Over a trestle the runaway train rumbled, then leaned crazily around a curve. On one side now was a cliff edge, a drop of half a thousand feet to the rocks of the canyon bed below.

"Don't worry, boys! I'll stop this here stampede!" Toot thundered, his voice rising above the pounding roar of flying iron.

"You got to get to the engine . . . shut off the steam! Turn on sand, brakes!" shrieked the conductor.

But Toot was already clattering along the top of the caboose.

Another sharp, desperate curve, and Toot thought sure the train

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would jump over into empty space this time. But it stayed on the tracks, and Toot stayed, somehow, on the wildly weaving catwalk. Running forward to the first box car, directly ahead of the caboose, he twisted the rusty brake with all his massive strength. It broke, the wheel coming free in his immense hands.

"Looks like this railroad ought to keep things in better shape," Toot mumbled as he threw the pieces of iron from him. "I'm goin' to make a complaint. Durned carelessness!"

He stared ahead, suddenly halting on his way to the next box car. The engine and tender had vanished! So had the first stock car, and the next! Toot blinked, still not comprehending. A mountain was rushing straight toward him, a solid red wall of rock with a black hole in it.

When it dawned upon Toot that the hole was a tunnel, he flattened himself just in time! He was roaring along in an inferno of darkness now, with smoke stinging his eyes and raking at his lungs. Toot swore and hung on. A few seconds later he flashed back into daylight.

Lumbering on again, Toot set the brakes of the freight cars one by one, twisting them to the last notch. He broke the chain gear on one, but it seemed to him that the speed of the train was beginning to slow down a little.

Reaching the front stock car, he lurched to its head end and found himself staring down into the coal-filled tender and the cab of the laboring locomotive.

"Now what in blazes did that ticket puncher say about sand and steam?" he muttered. "Dang it! I don't know how to gentle one of these iron hosses! Only thing to do, looks like, is unhitch!"

Gingerly, and at the risk of getting his big hands crushed, he uncoupled the engine, and he felt the train cars jerk and tremble as they began to lose speed. Climbing back up to the stock-car top, he watched the now unencumbered locomotive go tearing onward to the next curve.

"There goes the hoss, but we've saved the wagons." Toot grinned as the engine and tender leaped the tracks in a gust of smoke and red-hot coals. Over and over whirled the mass of iron, plowing up clouds of dust and gravel before it finally ended its spectacular plunge at the bottom of the gorge, hundreds of feet below.

PLODDING back over the roofs of the slowing cars, Toot further tightened the brakes as he went. The train bumped over the stretch of track that the engine had damaged in taking its leap, but no cars were derailed, and by the time Toot reached the caboose, the wheels had practically stopped turning.

"Are you rannies still here?" he roared out as he climbed down into the trainmen's quarters. "Aw, all right, I'll untie you as soon as I can." He grinned when Curly Steve advised him where to go.

The brakeman and the conductor were almost fainting from relief, and their faces were still streaked with cold sweat. Even the cool-nerved Steve Tustin was a bit shaky when he crawled to his feet after Toot had set him free. He declined a drink, however, when the conductor got a whiskey flask from a locker the moment he was at liberty. Toot drank heartily—not because he needed the stimulant, but because he liked it.

"We're only a mile or so from Silver Dollar now," one of the trainmen said. "If we're careful in workin' the brakes, we can coast down."

The two Rockin' T rannies had

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just about enough of train riding! The idea seemed practicable, though, and the engineless freight train was cautiously maneuvered around the remaining bends until the booming mining town of Silver Dollar hove into view. Luckily, there had never been any danger of collision—there were only two passenger trains and one freight a week on this little branch line.

Leaving the railroad men to do their explaining at the depot, Steve and Toot got their slim belongings out of the caboose and entered the town. Silver Dollar was an old camp that had been fading until a rich new strike had brought population in again like a swarm of ants. This had meant more mouths to feed. Supplies, especially meat, were at a premium.

But, thanks to the Blacky Andross gang, the Rockin' T had no beef to sell. The more Steve and Toot thought of it the angrier they got.

Steve Tustin halted at the first corner and looked about him; this was their first trip here and he and Toot were strangers, knowing nobody.

"Toot, you look up the sheriff and get him on the job pronto," Steve advised his big partner. "I'll send a wire to Bill Barbee tellin' him the bad news, and then I'd better look up Gustman and see if we can't get a time extension on our contract."

"O. K. But who's Gustman?"

"The man who was to buy our steers," Steve said ironically. "See you later."

HURRYING back, Steve found the little depot staff in a great state of excitement, for the trainmen of the ill-fated freight had already broken the news. Finally they got around to sending Steve's telegram to Spruce City, arrangements being made with the agent there to have it taken to Bill Barbee at the Rockin' T ranch by special rider.

"You the owner of the cows that was stolen?" the Silver Dollar depot agent asked. "Notified Sheriff Shannon?"

"Part owner. And my pard is seeing the sheriff," Steve replied grimly.

"This is a terrible thing—came near being even worse, the boys tell me," said the agent. "We've wired the railroad authorities, of course, and there'll be the very devil to pay."

"There'll be me and my pards to pay, too. We paid freight on those steers, and the company's responsible," Steve reminded the agent as he left the office.

That was true enough. The Rockin' T could sue the road for recovery of the property's value. But this would take many weeks, perhaps months, of litigation, and the pards had to have the money within a few days.

It took him some time to find the office of Luther Gustman; it was becoming dark when Steve discovered it at the rear of a gloomy stone warehouse several blocks away from Main Street. It seemed that Gustman was the boss of most of the camp's business, dealing in supplies of all kinds, from canned beans to mining machinery.

Luther Gustman shook hands cordially with Steve Tustin when the Rockin' T representative introduced himself. Gustman was alone in his office, and his bulky, fat body seemed to fill it to overflowing. He was a cheerful man with a squeaking voice and shrill laugh.

"The cattle are here, are they, Mr. Tustin?" He beamed. "I'll show you where to unload 'em. I don't need to tell you that I'm mighty glad

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to get this shipment—there's a real meat shortage here."

"It'll have to last a while longer," Steve Tustin said, lacing and lighting a cigarette. "I've got no beef for you." And he recounted what had happened.

Gustman was shocked and sympathetic, asking questions as he lighted the office lamp. He shook his head helplessly and pursed his thick lips when Steve had finished.

"You'll recover from the railroad, of course, so it could be worse, Tustin," he encouraged.

"That won't save us. We've got a loan at Spruce City to meet, pronto, and if we don't, we'll lose our ranch," said Curly Steve, now really getting down to cases. "Mr. Gustman, my pards and I aim to recover those steers. I know that our agreement calls for delivery today, but I was wondering if you wouldn't extend the time a few days, so—"

"Gee-whillikins, but I'm sorry, Tustin!" Gustman said. "Wish I could do that, but it's simply impossible. I've got my contracts with others to fill. And just yesterday I had a chance to buy some cows cheaper than your price—so now I'll have to wire to have 'em shipped here. I doubt, too, if you can recover your stock, Tustin, though I wish you all the luck in the world. When Andross steals anything, it *stays* stolen. You don't know the country west of here like I do. Beyond and above Apex Pass, where your cows were taken, is the so-called Rustler's Pass. It leads to a gosh-awful badlands of mountains, canyons, timber and the devil knows what. The sheriff never has been able to figger that hide-out, and I don't think he ever will."

"Then the Rockin' T will figger it out," said Curly Steve. "Our deal is off, eh?"

"Afraid so," Gustman said ruefully as he got up and waddled to the door with Steve. "Maybe the bank, or whoever you borrowed the money from, will extend the loan. Under the circumstances—"

Steve laughed humorlessly. "Not Rufe Roxbury." He shrugged. "He'll jump at the chance to foreclose on the Rockin' T. And he'd be a fool not to, I reckon. But we're goin' to get those cows back," he added stubbornly. "I've wired for Bill Barbee."

"Who's he?"

"Bill?" Steve chuckled. "Why, Bill's the third partner—and he's Beautiful."

CHAPTER III.

SHERIFF HATER.

RIGHT from the first, Toot Smith looked for trouble in his interview with the Silver Dollar law boss, and Toot usually found what he was looking for. Toot's bullheadedness had got him jailed on several occasions, and each time he came out with a lower opinion of "star toters." For sheriffs and such, Toot had little use.

Sheriff John Shannon's quarters were in the front of the jail, an old log structure at the upper end of the town, and when Toot walked huffily in he found the sheriff engaged in a two-handed card game with a tall, mustached man who wore a deputy's badge. The cells beyond were empty of prisoners. The law, it seemed, had little to do except pass the livelong time away.

"I'm Toot Smith!" he announced, clearing his foghorn throat. Remembering his own poker session, the sight of cards angered him.

Sheriff Shannon looked up at him.

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The Silver Dollar officer was a short, thick-set man with a square, red face and iron-gray hair.

"Do your tootin' somewheres else, then," the sheriff told Smith irritably, and transferred his attention back to the game. "High, low, jack, game," he announced to the deputy. He shuffled the cards and passed them across to the deputy. "Cut the deck, Hensley."

"Never mind, Hensley. *I'll* cut it!" Toot roared as he stalked forward. Picking up the neatly stacked deck, he ripped it in two with one wrench of his powerful hands. Then he hurled the remains—one hundred and four separate pieces—into the air in a snowstorm of colored paper.

"Why, you . . . you—" sputtered the astounded officers as they leaped to their feet.

As Shannon and Hensley clawed out their guns, Toot reached toward his own. Then, realizing that he had none, he lifted his huge fists—not in surrender, but with menace.

"There's been a big robbery at Apex Pass!" he exclaimed loudly. "Blacky Andross and his gang stopped the train and stole cattle belongin' to that well-known Spruce City ranch, the Rockin' T, of which I am part owner! I crave service from you lazy tin stars! Service and plenty of it!"

"Service is what you'll get!" the sheriff shouted back, covering Toot with his six-shooter. "I don't allow nobody to walk in here and bulldoze me like this! You're under arrest, yuh big lobo! Hensley, unlock the jail door!"

To Toot Smith's immense disgust, he was herded into a dank cell and the big door of iron rods was shut and locked behind him. The charges, Shannon said, would be disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace.

This had a sobering effect on the big puncher—for a while. Standing close to the long bars of the door, he attempted to tell the lawman what had happened.

"And then the engine went off the tracks and down the mountain," he concluded meekly. "It's murder, I'm telling you—Andross killed the engineer and fireman."

"You'd better sleep off your drunk," Sheriff Shannon suggested. "Why don't you make use of that cot in there?"

Toot proceeded to make use of it. The bunk was of iron and bracketed to the thick log wall, but with one heave of his wide shoulders he tore it loose from its fastenings and beat it to pieces against the stone floor.

"I'll see that you get an extra thirty days for that," Shannon said coldly.

Before Toot could make scathing reply to the sheriff's promise, several men hurried into the office with news backing up the weird story Toot had tried to unfold. By this time the whole town—except the law officers—had heard of Blacky Andross' latest exploit.

"Looks like the big feller's yarn might have been partly true, after all," said Deputy Hensley.

"Yes, maybe we'd better go down to the depot and get the straight of things," Sheriff Shannon agreed hastily, jamming on his Stetson.

"Hey! Let me out of here!" bellowed the prisoner. "You can't keep me locked up thisaway!"

But the officers had already stampeded out with the men who had brought the news, and Toot was left alone in the darkening jail.

THE big ranny roared a time or two like a caged lion, but when the only results were echoes that hurt his own ears, he stopped to take stock of the exasperating situation.

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"The idea of a big ranchin' magnut like me bein' in jail!" he muttered. "Well, I won't stay, that's all there is to it!"

From the wreckage of the bunk he selected one of the steel side pieces, and with this as a fulcrum to put his gigantic strength and weight against, he went to work on the long bars of the jail door.

Old and corroded though they were, the bars would have withstood the attacks of any ordinary prisoner, but even when new the bars couldn't have been expected to survive the onslaught of a Hercules. Added to Toot's muscular power was a certain amount of cunning, and the barrier couldn't resist the combination. The two center bars and the adjacent pair bent like tin. After a few minutes' struggle Toot got his immense body through sidewise.

"Durn fools," he muttered, walking across Shannon's office on his way out. "I'd have caught my death o' cold in that blasted place. It ain't no place for an hombre who's delicate. And I reckon I'll just take charge of *this!*" he added, grabbing up a big Colt .45 that lay on one corner of the sheriff's desk.

It was quite dark when he reached the street, and if anybody saw him leave the Silver Dollar bastile, at least no attempt was made to stop him. Striding alongside the building, he reached the alley, increasing his pace to a determined trot and crashing over empty boxes and piles of trash on the way.

A square of dim lantern light marked the entrance of a livery barn, and Toot pounded in, almost frightening the stableman out of his wits.

"Saddle me up the strongest, fastest cayuse you've got!" Toot frowned menacingly.

"Yes, but—" The employee gulped.

"But hurry!" roared Toot Smith, flourishing the nickel-plated Colt six-shooter he had borrowed from the sheriff. "And you can make out the bill," Toot added conscientiously, as the man fell over himself to obey orders, "to Rockin' T Ranch, Spruce City, T. Smith and Pards, Proprietors."

WHEN Curly Steve Tustin reached the sheriff's office, after his disappointing interview with Luther Gustman, he found the lawmen milling about in considerable excitement. Steve expected to see—and especially hear—Toot Smith right in the center of things, but the big ranny was not in evidence.

Steve spotted the flustered-looking sheriff and told him who he was. "I reckon you've already heard the story from my pard Toot. Where is he? I forgot to give him supper money."

"Supper money? Good gorsh!" Deputy Hensley sniggered sardonically. He pointed to the bent and twisted bars at the end of the room. "Does that look like he was weak with hunger?"

"What's happened?" Steve demanded, but he had a premonition.

Sheriff Shannon mopped his perspiring forehead. "I left him locked up here to cool off, but he wouldn't cool," the lawman complained. "I checked up on his story. It was all true, but he wouldn't wait. I was hasty in jailin' him, maybe, but he—"

"I savvy." Curly Steve nodded. "I know Toot Smith. But where did he go after makin' a mess of your calaboose?"

"Seems he took a livery hoss and lit out," Shannon said. "It looks like he went after Blacky Andross all by his lonesome. He was mad enough. I'm organizing a posse now,

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Tustin, and I guess you'll want to join. Maybe we can overtake the big . . . the big . . . fella," concluded the sheriff, failing to think of a word expressive enough. "I'm afraid he's goin' to get himself in a worse jam than ever, if we don't. He took a gun from my desk here—"

"Toot can use it." Steve grinned.

"Not this one, he can't," corrected Shannon. "It's a single-action Colt I was goin' to have repaired. The tip of the firing pin is busted off, so it won't reach the cartridge caps. It just won't shoot."

CHAPTER IV.

BILL BARBEE.

LEAVING the barber shop, Rufe Roxbury lighted a cigar and stood on the corner of Spruce City's main street for a few minutes, watching the horse-and-wagon traffic of late afternoon. Hands clasped behind his tall, spare figure, he teetered back and forth on his toes, sometimes calling out in greeting. Well-dressed, as always, in his expensive townsman's clothes, he smiled with self-satisfaction. The grimace didn't improve Rufe's face much; it deepened rather than erased its network of wrinkles and deep-etched lines.

The grin faded. Rufe had spotted Jim Brooks, his nephew, approaching from a side street. Not wanting to talk to Jim, Rufe hurriedly crossed toward the dingy office where he carried on his money-lending and land operations.

"Howdy, Roxbury." This was a cool and level voice which spoke as he stepped up on the sidewalk.

"Why . . . hello, Barbee," Rufe said, startled. He was always startled when he saw Barbee. So was everybody.

There was nothing in Bill's outfit or gear to attract notice: he wore Levi pants faded to a pale blue, run-over Coffeyville boots that made his bowed legs seem more warped, if possible, than they actually were. A Stetson in a state of ruin and a patched flannel shirt made up the rest of his careless costume. The stag-handled Colt .45s that he wore low on his thighs were the only items of his equipment that seemed to be in good repair. And those guns glistened like blue satin.

It was Bill Barbee's face that perplexed folks, even those who thought they had seen everything! It was more than homely; it was a scramble. The lean cheeks and crooked stub nose were sprinkled with freckles, and the mouth was slanted in a direction that could have been either a grin or a frown. The final touch of ugliness was given by the bushy, reddish eyebrows, which ran together in the center, over a pair of exceedingly piercing eyes. This, and other reasons, made Barbee almost unbeatable in a poker game—and in other, grimmer contests. Nobody could guess what went on behind that queer conglomeration of features. Strangest of all, he was called Beautiful Bill!

"You didn't go to Silver Dollar with your pards, eh?" Roxbury grunted.

"Nope, I'm holdin' down the spread—or at least I was until I came into town a bit ago to get Ugly shod. He throwed a shoe, and the ranch ain't equipped for blacksmith work just yet."

That was another paradox, Rufe thought. Bill Barbee's cayuse, standing by him at the hitch rack, was a sleek and splendid strawberry roan. And it was named Ugly!

"Your pards ought to be collectin' for the cattle about now," Rufe said, looking at his watch. "It's a good thing, because that note falls due in

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a couple days, and I must insist on havin' the money on the dot. I'm a bit short just now." He smiled deprecatingly. "I hope you boys won't be reckless with the cash. It was my suggestion, you know, shipping the steers up to Silver Dollar for that big price. You'll get ten dollars a head more than they'd fetch at Casper." His voice changed, suddenly hardening as a young, dejected-looking ranny approached hesitatingly. "Well, what's eatin' you again, Jim?"

"If you're busy, I'll see you later," faltered Jim Brooks, the money lender's only relative. He was shabby, scared-looking, with earnest, calflike eyes. Bill Barbee had heard that he was married and trying to make a go of a tiny spread near the edge of town.

"I know what you want!" Rufe Roxbury snarled. "Money again, and without security! You think I'm a charitable institution?"

"It's only that we're short of stuff to eat over there," mumbled Brooks. He turned away, red-faced and horribly mortified.

"Well, Roxbury, I'll be going," Bill Barbee said abruptly. "And I reckon the Rockin' T will pay off the note when it's due."

He was about to scramble aboard his roan horse when a voice called to him from the street:

"There's a wire just come for you at the depot, Barbee! I heard the agent say he'd send someone out to the ranch with it, but you can get it now if you hurry."

Bill Barbee registered no surprise—that weirdly strange face of his masked every emotion. He thanked the man, mounted, and cantered off in the direction of the Spruce City depot.

Jim Brooks was still standing nearby, and Roxbury crooked a long forefinger at him, whistling as if calling a dog. On the money lender's sallow features was a peculiar smile as he watched Beautiful Bill until he had swept around a corner.

"Here, Jim. I'm givin' you a chance to earn some good dinero," Roxbury said, making out a check with an indelible pencil while Brooks stared in surprise. "It's fifty dollars, but I'm post-dating it so I can stop payment on it in case you fall down on your job."

"What have I got to do, Rufe?" Brooks mumbled, blinking at the check his uncle had given him.

"Nothin' much." Rufe grinned, showing long teeth. "Just ride herd on that hombre they call Beautiful Bill. Watch him and report back to me what he does. If he leaves the district, follow him. Savvy?"

BILL BARBEE tore open the yellow envelope the station agent had handed him and stalked out with it before the depot man could engage him in talk. Outside where it was lighter—it was now sunset—he withdrew the telegram and stared at the following ominous message:

COME AT ONCE AND BRING OUR HORSES. CATTLE STOLEN FROM TRAIN AT APEX.

STEVE.

Bill's drooping left eye twitched a little, the only indication that anything whatever was going on in the brain behind that curiously jumbled face. Crumpling the telegram into a ball, he flipped it away and started toward the tie rail where Ugly was awaiting him. He halted; across the street he saw the nephew of the money lender, who appeared to be watching him. Bill spat angrily into the ditch, then called out Brooks' name.

"You . . . you want me, Barbee?"

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Jim Brooks quavered, approaching the Rockin' T ranny with lagging, conscience-stricken steps.

"Yeah, I want to see you," said Barbee with a mild oath. Reaching into his Levis, he pulled out a small wad of bills and peeled away the top one, a twenty. "Take this here money and buy a load of grub," he growled. "Don't thank me. It's a loan, and I want it back so it'll be handy in my old age."

Blinking, a look of stupefaction on his thin face, Jim watched Beautiful Bill and Ugly go hammering out of town in a swirling dust fog.

Brooks swallowed hard a couple of times, then tore Rufe Roxbury's check into a hundred pieces.

CHAPTER V.

BADLANDS TRAIL.

WHEN Barbee left the Rockin' T with Steve's gray Ghost horse and Toot's Sail Away, the latter a huge and powerful buckskin horse, it was past nine o'clock and there was a big, bright moon hanging in the star-sprinkled east. Going to the ranch hadn't been far out of his way, fortunately, and he struck the railroad tracks at a point some ten miles beyond Spruce City.

This was the only feasible route to Silver Dollar, and it was one of the reasons why the Rockin' T pards had decided to ship their cattle rather than attempt to drive them. The freight rates were high, considering the short haul, but they were getting a good price for the steers and the railroad would get them to their destination in better condition. Now this amazing theft—Bill was still trying to figure it out—had ruined everything.

In spite of the moon, it was as dark as the Pit in the canyons at times, and Barbee had to take it easy, not wanting to risk his partners' horses or his own.

When he reached Apex, the eastern sky was turning a cold gray with the morning. Reaching the flats, he saw the blaze of a big campfire, and his nostrils welcomed the pungent aroma of strong coffee. A posse of some twenty men was here awaiting daylight.

"Hey, Beautiful!" hailed a familiar voice, and in a few minutes Bill was gripping hands with Curly Steve.

"Where's Toot?" Bill asked while Steve greeted his own horse.

"He's on one of his rampages." Steve groaned. "He's ahead of us somewhere with a busted gun and brains in the same shape."

Something that might have been a grin twisted the countenance of Beautiful Bill. He listened attentively while his partner told him of the Blacky Andross coup and of the happenings since. Then Steve took Bill over to Sheriff Shannon and introduced him.

"Another of your pards, eh, Tustin?" Shannon grunted. "I'm glad to meet—" For the first time he got a look at Beautiful Bill in the growing light. The lawman took a surprised backward step. "Glad to meet you," he finished lamely. "Gawsh!" he muttered to himself. "Well, he ain't as big as Smith, anyhow, and that's one consolation. But the face on this'n would scare the devil himself."

It was now bright enough to travel. The posse mounted and started along one of the branch side canyons, following the unmistakable swath cut by the stolen herd and the horses of the Andross bunch. There would certainly be no difficulty in trailing the Rockin' T steers, Steve and Bill agreed; if the posse quit the chase this time it would be for some other reason. It seemed to the pards,

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however, that the posse wasn't overly anxious to tangle with the gang, even with a two-to-one advantage in numbers.

After they had traveled half the morning, the gulch widened out, and the man hunters came upon the black, still-warm remains of a fire—the spot where the bandits had camped and bedded the stock down for the night. A quarter of a mile from this place was a little, swift-

As they tangled there in the rustlers' canyon, the fight was brief but terrific.

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running creek, and here Beautiful Bill made a discovery. He picked up a battered Stetson hat.

"It's Toots," he said laconically.

Sheriff Shannon and Deputy Hensley made a brisk, matter-of-fact hunt for the body they were sure they would find, but all their search brought to light was a muddled spot of ground that might have been torn up by the boots of a man in his death throes. There were droplets of drying blood, too, and to the sheriff this was conclusive.

"It's all over for the big feller." He sighed.

Steve discovered a couple of human teeth and passed them to Barbee for inspection. "Recognize 'em, Bill?"

"There's gold in 'em," said Barbee. "If Toot has any fillings, they'd be solid iron. Nope, these ain't Toot's. But I guess he's in trouble. Let's vamoose!"

In spite of the posse's tendency to hold back, they increased the pace. Steve was leading Toot's horse, Sail Away, and Barbee rode at his side. Back in Silver Dollar, Steve had borrowed a gun in place of the one that the rustlers had taken from him, and he was more than eager for a chance to give it a workout. The tracks were very fresh now, and it seemed that he wouldn't have long to wait!

THE canyon made a sharp turn, narrowing as it was pinched off by two frowning gray cliffs of granite. Ahead was a natural barrier of gigantic rounded boulders piled up like pebbles jumbled by the hand of a giant. Between them, wherever they found scant roothold, grew gnarled pines. There was a passageway, but one so narrow that men or animals couldn't negotiate it except in single file.

Shannon's men unlimbered carbines and revolvers. This was the dreaded Rustler's Pass, beyond which few honest men had dared to venture.

"Careful, men. They might be there, waitin' to pick us off," the sheriff warned, giving orders to dismount and proceed on foot.

But Beautiful Bill rode boldly forward, for he had made out something white fastened to a stick at the base of the rock pile. It was a piece of paper. Bill tore it loose and came riding back with it. It was a roughly printed warning, misspelled, but threateningly to the point:

> we Have got the umbray Name of tootsmith. If You Try to folloe us eny farther We will Kill tootsmith first Thing. and Then We will pick off the rest of You. rememmber!. Go Back or we will blow helll owt of tootsmith. We are Sick of Him anyhow.
>
> Andross bunch.

Steve and Bill Barbee grinned at each other. Toot was very much alive, anyway, and knowing the big fellow as they did, they could savvy the trouble the gang was having!

The posse was relieved, too, but for a different reason. Deputy Hensley voiced it: "They've got a hostage and they'll sure do as they promised if we go on ahead. That'd make *us* responsible, in a way, for Smith's death. Looks like the only thing we can do is go back to town." Then, not liking the look in the steady eyes of Beautiful Bill, he hastened to smooth it over. "It's for your pard's sake, of course, that we're turnin' back. If he hadn't bungled into this, we'd get them sidewinders sure."

"Instead of goin' back to Silver Dollar," said Curly Steve, "you hombres wait here—until dark, anyhow. Bill and I will slip on ahead ourselves and see what we can do."

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After talking it over with his men, Sheriff Shannon agreed, for he could see that Bill and Steve weren't to be talked out of it. So, leaving Toot's horse with the posse, the two Rockin' T rannies slipped through the pass and headed into the unknown.

CHAPTER VI.

ADVENTURES OF TOOT SMITH.

TOOT was in a rather confused but very angry frame of mind when he had pounded out of Silver Dollar aboard the livery-stable horse. It was always the big waddy's way to act first, and then reason it out afterward. He would have liked to have Steve Tustin with him, but he didn't want to risk getting arrested again while looking for him, so he started alone for Apex Pass.

Before moonrise he had already covered most of the distance, though it was a wonder that horse and rider hadn't broken their necks a score of times. When he reached Apex he halted for half an hour, so that his steaming mount could get its wind. Then he swung into the canyon into which he had seen the steers being driven many hours before.

The moon was a big help then, and at times he could see the marks left by the herd as distinctly as in broad day. There wasn't much chance of missing his quarry, for there had been no side canyons where the cattle could have turned off.

It was about three o'clock in the morning, he judged, when he saw the ruddy glow of the campfire up ahead. Approaching nearer, he realized that he had reached the bed ground. The gang was loafing.

Reckless as Toot was, he wasn't altogether crazy, and he carefully dismounted, secured his horse and edged forward on foot, keeping to the denser shadows and conscious of the fact that his white Angora chaps could easily be seen—and shot at. Toot hoped that most of the rustlers would be asleep and that he would have only two or three guards to deal with.

But luck was against him. Only four of the desperadoes were stretched out by the fire, and he doubted that even these were asleep. The others were mounted, watching the restless little herd of stolen steers. Now and again Toot heard snatches of talk and laughter.

"The coyotes!" the huge Rockin' T ranny muttered. "I'll learn 'em!"

He waited behind a convenient boulder until it began to grow light. Toot glanced at his nickeled Colt six-gun again, making sure that it was fully loaded. He thumbed a handful of extra cartridges from the loops of his belt and put them into a handy pocket. Then he moved off toward the left. A couple of the rustlers had left the fire and were walking toward the creek. They carried a bucket and were evidently after fresh water for coffee. With the clumsy speed of a grizzly bear, Toot moved to head them off.

When the two bandits reached the creek, smashing through the thick fringe of brush that hid it from the others at the fire, Toot was there ahead of them, his six-shooter gripped in his immense paw, an unpleasant smile on his broad face.

"Don't move, you two!" he snarled in tones as low as his bellowing voice could manage. "And don't yell!"

One of the pair recognized the big puncher, having been one of those who had tied Toot to the seat of the caboose. With his face graying, the bandit dropped the bucket and raised his hands. The other one, in black chaps and red shirt, followed suit. Toot was terribly businesslike and so was the gun he was wielding!

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"Drop your guns and belts into the crick," Toot ordered. "And no monkeyshines, monkeys! If I have to kill you it'll be a pleasure."

"You can't get by with this!" mumbled the blotchy-faced bandit, but he and his companion followed instructions and their armament vanished into the white, swift-running water.

Toot hoped that as soon as these men were missed, another man or two would be sent to investigate their nonappearance. Then others would be sent to look for the second bunch—and so on.

It would have been fine, if it had worked!

Before the huge cowboy could get himself set—things happened! The bushes suddenly parted, and the gaunt, evil face of Blacky Andross appeared. Directly behind the gang leader were several of his henchmen. Evidently Toot had been seen on his way to the creek in spite of his precautions.

"What th—"

Toot was going to make the best of it; he was going to get Andross, at least, and maybe some of the others. Toots gun hammer was already back, and lining the sights on Andross, he let it drop. The result was a flat, empty click.

Again he tried, thinking a shell had missed fire, but only another snipping sound rewarded him—and then he was fighting for his life. His two prisoners had leaped upon him like cougars, and it was this attack, probably, that saved Toot's life; for Andross would have shot and killed him if the others hadn't gotten into Andross' line of fire.

EMITTING a short, bawling yell, like a bull stung by the lance of a picador, Toot went mightily to work. He had dropped the broken gun in the first rush—he could have used it as a clubbing weapon otherwise—but he still had his gigantic fists, and they went to work like battering-rams. One terrific punch smashed out the teeth of the red-shirted bandit and sent him thudding down like a broken sack of bran. Then Toot Smith seized the blotchy bandit, regardless of the blows that were peppering Toot, and whirled him bodily into the air. Toot hurled him straight at the others, who were rushing in like a wolf pack. Bowled over by the screeching human projectile, two other buscaderos went down in a tangle of flying arms and legs.

But they were too many even for Toot. Others piled in, and the big waddy was overpowered by sheer numbers and beaten into helplessness, though not into willing submission. Several eyes were blackened before the roaring ranny from the Rockin' T finally had to call it quits.

"Now hold the big galoot!" Blacky Andross panted. "No, we're not goin' to kill him—not just yet," he said to silence the clamor of those who had felt the impact of Toot's fists. He came up to the prisoner with quick, harsh questions. "So the train didn't jump the track, eh?" And as he got no answer to that one, he asked where the posse was, for it didn't occur to any of them that Toot had come after them alone. Toot, however, wasn't talkative—he knew nothing of any posse, and couldn't have answered, anyhow.

"It's a cinch that the law ain't far behind him," said Andross. "So we'd better push them steers on, pronto. But first, one of you change shirts and chaps with this big rannihan. We'll take him with us, and if there's shootin' he'll take the same bullet chances as the rest of us.

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What's your name, hombre?"

Toot told him, adding other remarks as well. Much against his will, he was forced to exchange his outer costume for the vest, shirt and chaparajos of a man named Tarver, the only one of the gang whose size approached Toot's. Then the gang broke camp and got the herd into motion. Toot wasn't bound, and he was put aboard his own horse, but the gun hawks kept a close watch on him at every moment.

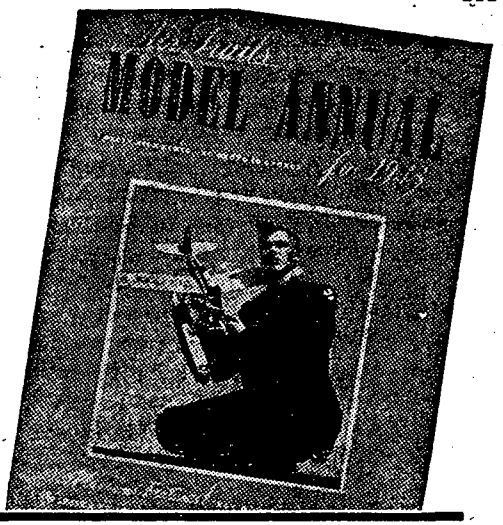
It took half an hour to get the cattle through the steep and narrow Rustler's Pass, where the gang left the note prominently displayed on a forked stick.

"I don't think we'll be followed now—not if your friends value your hide, Smith," Andross growled when they moved on again.

They were entering some of the weirdest, most desolate country that Toot ever remembered seeing. On one side was the backbone of the continent, peak upon peak, mottled with perpetual snow, the lonely and terrible birthplace of the clouds. This tremendous ridge dwarfed the nearer mountains, most of which had summits above timberline and shoulders covered with white, dead pines. Innumerable canyons and ravines intersected the maze of shattered ranges, some of them roaring with water. The rocks and the towering walls of the cliffs were vividly colored in unreal shades of red and yellow. Toot had seen landscapes like it only in nightmares.

The gang herded the cattle up a branching gorge, and soon the plodding animals were following a ledge far above the rushing creek below. This turned and widened out into a secluded meadow dotted with wild flowers.

"You hombres can handle 'em the rest of the way to the hide-out," Blacky Andross said, calling a halt.



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He turned his horse and examined the empty back trail, raising himself high in his stirrups and studying the horizon for a full minute.

"Leavin' us now, boss?" asked Tarver, who seemed very proud of the fancy white chaps he had taken in exchange—much to Toot's disgust—for his own dirty and torn horsehides.

"Yes, I've got business, and I might not be at headquarters for two or three days," the bandit leader replied. "Two of you can come with me. I don't think anyone will chase the cattle this far, but if they do"—his voice hardened—"if they do, shoot Smith pronto! Keep your eye on him, and better keep him toward the rear. See you later."

SELECTING two of his henchmen—a shifty-eyed gunman called Joe Hand, and another, foreign-looking one named Tony Nero—Andross rode away with them, taking one of the numberless ravines as a highway to wherever it was he was bound for. When those three were out of sight the seven other rustlers started on with the cattle again.

The level ground they were crossing now was almost like a park, with boulders and clumps of pines here and there to relieve its monotony. Nearby, however, was a precipice that dropped sheerly for three hundred feet.

Tarver rode at the rear of the herd with Toot, who seemed to be having quite a bit of trouble with his horse. Gradually, Toot and his bandit guard lagged farther and farther behind.

About an hour after Andross, Hand and Nero had taken their departure, Toot Smith pulled up his horse with an oath. He had maneuvered the animal to within twenty feet of the cliff edge.

"This blasted livery nag!" mumbled the Rockin' T waddy. "It's lamed himself, I think. I'll look at its hoofs."

The herd and its drovers were just out of sight behind a grove of aspens when Toot heaved himself out of the saddle.

"You don't use your spurs enough, that's all that's the matter," the big-framed Tarver growled, watching Toot with suspicion. "Sock him with your gut hooks. It don't pay to be easy on a hoss."

"Well, look at this!" Toot said in an amazed voice. He had evidently found something fascinating about his mount's near forefoot.

"Look at what?" Tarver said, dismounting.

And quick as a flash the big puncher had him! The impact of the two heavy men was like the collision of a pair of mad stallions. Before the burly bandit could jerk out his holstered revolver, his wrists were in Toot's bone-crushing grip, and the men were rolling over and over toward the brink of the chasm.

Tarver was stupid to have been taken in by so obvious a ruse, but there was nothing stupid about the way he began to fight! For once in his life, at least, it seemed that the big waddy from the Rockin' T had met his match!

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIGHTIN' THREE.

SHERIFF SHANNON'S motto seemed to be "Live and let live," even when dealing with murderers, but the Rockin' T principle was not so easygoing. Such cases as this called for leaden, and not the Golden Rule. Bill and Steve didn't suspect Shannon and company of out-and-out dishonesty, but they knew human nature, and they thought it

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quite likely that the sheriff would take more interest in this case after the railroad company had got around to offering a big reward.

Pushing on beyond Rustler's Pass, Tustin an' Barbee rode with increasing caution, and for a while the gulch was too narrow for them to do the scouting they would have liked. It would not do, of course, to catch up unexpectedly with the Andross gang —Toot Smith's safety had to be considered.

"Toot would want us to do this, that's sure," Steve said as they warily followed the tracks up the steep side canyon.

Bill nodded. "Hostage or not, they'll kill him when they're ready. Looks like it's up to us. We ought to be pretty close now—they sure can't move very fast with those steers in country like this."

They had followed the long ledge to the top of the mesa, and judging from the nature of the plentiful sign the stolen herd could not be far ahead. They puzzled over a spot where it seemed that three riders had left the main party, but they continued to follow the herd, riding warily and taking advantage of cover whenever possible.

Then Bill Barbee, who was a bit in the lead, reined in his cayuse with an exclamation. "Steve! Look over yonder!"

Near the edge of the cliff, less than two hundred yards from them, two giant figures were struggling, locked in mortal combat. One of them was Toot, evidently, for there was no mistaking the floppy vest and white Angoras. The other man was fully as large, and was fighting furiously, carrying his opponent nearer and nearer to the dizzy brink of the precipice. Nearby stood two horses, but the rustler gang was not in sight.

"Come on, Bill!" gasped Steve as he urged his gray Ghost forward at a scrambling bound that sent the turf flying.

Racing toward the scene of the action, they cheered as they saw the fellow in the white chaps break loose from the other's bearlike embrace and batter his opponent to his knees. Then he in the white was gripped at the knees, and the two went floundering still closer to the rim of nothingness.

Then, to their utter horror, they watched the dark-clad giant lift up the other and heave him into space! There was a dwindling screech, and the man in the Angora chaps went catapulting downward, turning over and over in midair. The hurtling body struck a protecting tongue of granite, bounced crazily, then landed in a broken huddle of white at the base of the cliff, hundreds of feet below the top of the mesa.

"He's killed Toot!" Steve snarled, raking out his gun as he bore down on the winner.

"Hold it, Steve! Hold it!" shouted Bill Barbee, and on his oddly disarranged features something like a grin was dawning. "Listen!"

In a roaring voice that echoed reverberatingly from crag to crag, the mightily muscled conqueror was singing a defiant, triumphant song:

"Oh, we're fightin' fools from the Rockin' T,
We are Curly, and Toot, and Bill Barbee—"

Steve and Bill pulled up alongside their victorious pard and greeted him with affectionate abuse. "You cussed son, what's the idea of skeerin' us thataway?" Barbee demanded.

Toot Smith went to the cliff edge and gazed down regretfully. "I've got to come back here after this is over and get them chaps back," he growled.

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"Never mind them hair pants—it's a relief to see you rid of 'em," Bill grunted. "Where's our cows?"

"Half a mile ahead. Andross rode off a while ago with a couple men," Toot said. "Give me a gun!"

BILL BARBEE intrusted one of his stag-handled .45s to his big pard, and Toot was just scrambling back aboard his perfectly sound livery-stable horse when a pair of riders popped into view. They were two of the rustlers who had back-trailed to see what was delaying Tarver and Smith. They found out immediately!

"Get 'em up, you!" Curly Steve shouted, for, rattlesnake-fashion, the Rockin' T warned before striking.

The flat-faced bandit in the lead drew his gun, but before he could throw it into line there was a roar from Steve Tustin's Colt and the killer rocked backward from his saddle and thudded to the ground. The other desperado whirled his horse, but not quickly enough, and two shots from Toot's newly acquired pistol brought him writhing at his horse's feet.

"Come on, gents!" Toot roared. "Let's bust them others afore they have time to get set!"

They hammered forward at a gallop, and as they swung around the grove of quaking asp they had a clear view of the rustled Rockin' T cattle and the thieves who were riding herd on them. One was handling point; there was a flanker to keep the steers away from the cliff, and two rode the drag at the rear.

It seemed that they had heard the shots, for they had lost interest in the wearily straggling beef animals and had pulled up, facing about. The three partners were within a hundred yards of the drag riders, though, before the thieves realized what they were in for.

"It's that crazy Smith and a couple o'—" The yapping of the blotchy-faced rustler was blotted out by the earth-shaking thunder of heavy-caliber guns. Brighter than the daylight were the scintillating flashes of pale-orange flame that winked from the Rockin' T six-guns.

Steve Tustin and Toot Smith tangled with the two rustlers at the rear of the herd. The fight was brief but terrific. Toot's first shot wounded his man in the shoulder, but the return bullet killed Toot's cayuse, and the big ranny went rolling to the ground. Right in the midst of his flip-flop he fired again, and the blotchy-faced rustler's exulting grin was wiped off—as if with a red sponge—by a bullet that took him between the eyes. Steve, bent low over his pommel, emptied the other saddle, driving a brace of slugs through the occupant.

Bill Barbee pounded toward the bandit at the flank of the herd, and his distorted face, startling ordinarily, was now like something from out of Hades. Maybe it was this that caused the jittery rustler to fire twice at him and miss by yards each time; at any rate, before he could trigger the third time Bill was within a dozen yards. Barbee's first and only shot ripped through the cow thief's heart. Then, without even a pause, Bill veered toward the rustler at the head of the cattle herd.

"Don't shoot, mister!" yammered the survivor, throwing away his gun as if it had become too hot to hold. Barbee noted that this rustler had recently lost several front teeth. Bill thought he knew how and where! The rustler had already had more than a stomachful of the Rockin' T waddies.

Except for a few bruises, Toot hadn't been injured by his tumble,

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and he straddled the best of the gang's horses in place of the one that had been killed. The spread was in deeper debt than ever now—they had a livery horse to pay for!

But they were in a cheery frame of mind as they turned the cattle back down the mountain. The animals had been too fagged to stampede or even scatter during the gun fight, and not one was missing.

They questioned their prisoner as to the whereabouts of Blacky Andross and the others but he denied knowing where they had gone or what they were up to. All he knew—and he was too frightened to lie—was that they weren't headed for the gang's headquarters, a cabin about three miles across the mesa. Toot wanted to follow the vanished trio, but Steve and Bill reminded him that if they hoped to save the ranch they would have to sell the cattle, somehow, within the next twenty-four hours. Reluctantly, Toot agreed that for the time being, at least, Blacky Andross would have to go unpunished.

EARLY the next morning they reached Silver Dollar with the cattle they had fought so hard to win back, and they moved them in through one of the side streets. They had taken pity on the hard-driven beasts, had given them as much rest as possible, and as the return journey had all been downhill, the stock was in better shape than the owners expected. The steers had lost flesh, but there was still plenty of beef if only Luther Gustman could be persuaded to buy it.

Sheriff Shannon and the posse, rather shamefaced, helped them bring the cattle down. They hadn't expected to see the Rockin' T rannies alive again, and when they learned that seven of the murderers had been accounted for—six killed and one made prisoner—they were flabbergasted and a little awed.

"I'll jail this prisoner soon as I get the calaboose fixed up again," Sheriff Shannon said when they reached town. "Then I'll do what I can to track Andross down. I reckon I'll see you hombres later. Here's wishin' you luck with your shorthorns."

"Aw, go and ride your swivel chair!" Toot Smith roared after the departing officer.

The pards made arrangements with the proprietor of a feed lot a block from Main Street, and the cattle were driven into this temporary home. Then Steve Tustin went for another interview with Gustman, while Bill and Toot made some necessary purchases at the nearest store.

Curly Steve returned after an hour, and they could tell from his face that he had been unsuccessful. "We're out of luck here, it seems," he said dejectedly. "Gustman was nice about it, but he's bought cattle elsewhere—a shipment that will arrive tomorrow."

"He's got the market cornered, ain't he? And ain't the camp plumb out of meat?" drawled Beautiful Bill. "Why in blazes don't we break his corner, if he's gone back on the contract? Let's auction off the steers. What can we lose?"

Steve jumped at the idea, and Toot roared his approval. "I'll be the auctioneer!" The big puncher grinned. "I've allus wanted to yodel off a bunch of stock, and now's my chance."

"I wish we could auction *you* off by the pound, you ox," murmured Beautiful Bill.

The Rockin' T rannies spent the next few hours in advertising their sale by spreading the word around in the camp's many saloons. Bar-

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tenders obligingly soaped up the proclamation on their mirrors and windows, after a dollar or two had passed across their counters, and during this process Toot Smith became just a bit "mellow." Not that he was intoxicated—there wasn't enough whiskey in Silver Dollar for that, as Bill pointedly remarked.

But Toot was in remarkably fine voice when the auction began over at the feed lot. His usually hoarse foghorn tones had taken on a melodious, organlike quality. Toot's forceful chant could be easily heard throughout the whole town—and for a mile beyond it.

THE cattle were offered one at a time, and it soon became evident that Bill Barbee's idea had saved the day. A huge crowd had been attracted by the novelty of the affair, and not all were there out of curiosity. The meat famine had been in sway for a long time, and thanks to the recent metal strike there was plenty of money in circulation. Not only did the local butchers and merchants buy eagerly, but little groups of miners would bid against the storekeepers, buying a steer to share between them. Prices zoomed and rebounded. Toot's singsong warble became even sweeter and—if possible—louder.

"Tustin! You can't do this! Stop the sale!"

Steve turned to face Luther Gustman, who had just trotted through the crowd. The fat man's flabby face was red and glistening with anger and perspiration.

"You're ruinin' me!" he panted, shaking his pudgy little fists. "You've knocked the bottom out of my beef market. Lots of these storekeepers have got contracts with me; they've got no right to be buyin' your cows. Now I can't sell mine!"

Beautiful Bill stepped up to Gustman, his stride nonchalant, his face a fearsome thing to see. Even before he spoke, Gustman wilted.

"You've had your chance at these critters," Bill said softly. "Now make yourself scarce while you're all in one fat piece."

Terrified not so much by Bill's words as by his manner and appearance, Gustman waddled away even faster than he had come. Curly Steve looked doubtfully at his homely pard, wondering if he hadn't been too severe.

"Goin! Goin'!" chanted Toot as he auctioned away the last of the steers. "Goin' unless I hear some galoot raise the ante! Gone!"

The cattle sale was over, and later, when they had totaled up the cash received, the Rockin' T rannies were more than pleased at the result. They had taken in about three hundred dollars more than the price Luther Gustman had agreed to pay them for their stock when they had shipped it! And this in spite of the trail-worn condition of the cattle. Toot immediately celebrated by patronizing the hardware store.

"I've shore been havin' gun trouble on this trip, so I bought me a new one," he told Bill and Steve as they sat down to a Chinese-restaurant supper. "Here's yours back, Bill." Toot grinned, handing over one of the twin stag-handled Colts he had borrowed. "I've cleaned and oiled it."

"You'll be oiled yourself if you're not careful," Bill warned, as Toot ordered a drink before eating. "Go easy on that, Toot. We may need clear heads tonight."

"Meanin'?"

"Tell you later. What's in that other package, Toot? If it's what I'm afraid it is—"

"You're right, I reckon." Toot

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sighed. "It's a new pair of white Angora chaps. Luckily they happened to have my size—the man said he'd give up hope of sellin' 'em ten years ago. I'm goin' to put 'em on right now. I'm used to warm Angoras, bein' as I've allus been delicate in the legs."

Before Bill could make the sarcastic retort he intended, he saw a slim, familiar figure signaling to him cautiously from the doorway. Leaving his pards with a significant nod, Barbee hurried out onto the sidewalk.

"You want to see me, Jim? What you doin' up here at Silver Dollar, anyhow?"

It was growing dark now, and the thin face of young Jim Brooks seemed pale in the reflected light of a nearby saloon.

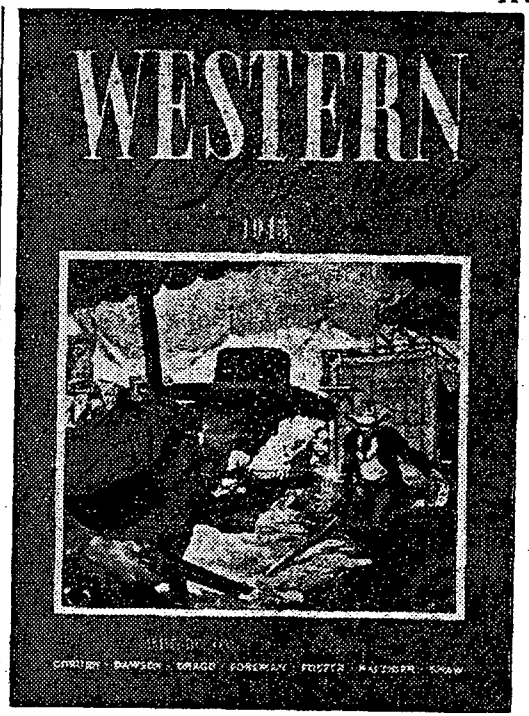
"There's something I got to tell you, Beautiful," Jim said guardedly. "Rufe Roxbury thought he was hirin' me to keep watch on you, but you done me a good turn, and I've been ridin' herd on him instead. He don't mean you and your partners any good, Bill."

"I know that. But what's new?"

Queer, Bill thought. When he'd slipped Jim that twenty he'd simply given it without thought of any return. It wasn't the money, he knew, that had bought this loyalty from this youth whom he hardly knew.

"Rufe's in Silver Dollar—or, at least, he's in a shack about two miles from here," Jim said tersely. "Just a bit ago, another man drove up in a buggy—a big, awful fat hombre. They're in there talkin', and I heard 'em plannin' to do you and your pards dirt. And there's three other fellers there, tough-lookin' jaspers I ain't never seen before. I thought I'd tell you—"

The drooping left eye of Beautiful Bill's sagged even more noticeably, and the other glimmered like polished steel. He put his hand on



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Jim's shoulder. "Thanks, amigo. You just lay low here in town and leave the dirty work to us. We'll be seein' you later. Now tell me exactly how to get to that shack."

"What's stirrin', Bill?" Toot rumbled when Beautiful Bill returned to the restaurant table.

"Finish eatin', saddle stiffs, and go easy on the dessert," said Beautiful, with a grimace that might have been either a grin or a snarl. "It's come quicker than I thought. We're ridin'."

CHAPTER VIII.

RHAPSODY IN COLT HARMONY.

GHOST, Ugly and Sail Away were waiting at a convenient tie rail. The three Rockin' T rannies mounted without further talk and pivoted their horses into the lamp-checked Main Street. At a clipped word from Bill they swung into a narrow side street leading north, and the lights of Silver Dollar, circled by halos of dust, faded out behind them. The rutted wagon road they were following made a twist to the left after about a mile, and Beautiful Bill halted for a brief palaver.

"Holed up over yonder in a cabin beyond them tall pines," Bill said, "are the five murderin' polecats we're callin' on. Toot knows three of 'em better'n we do, Steve—Mr. Andross and two of his cutthroat pards."

Toot Smith's voice rose like the mutterings of approaching thunder. "This is the end of *their* train ride! If they're there, we'll blast the livin' blazes—"

Bill went on speaking. "The other two hombres are the higher-ups of this deal. One's Rufe Roxbury—"

"Rufe!" Toot ejaculated blankly.

"Yes, the nice man who lent us money to stock our ranch, after we'd spent all our own dinero to buy the real estate," Bill said sarcastically. "The minute I heard of the rustlin' I suspected Rufe, and afterward I was almost sure. Who would commit a train robbery, murder included, for less'n a hundred head of steers? And how come Andross knew all about that shipment? Rufe *arranged* to have him steal the critters, so we couldn't pay off his note in time to stop foreclosure."

"That's right," agreed Curly Steve. "I can see it all now. And the other man is—"

"Luther Gustman, of course." Beautiful Bill laughed. "Rufe made a three-cornered deal with him and Andross. Gustman furnished the bait by pretendin' to buy our stuff at a top price, and he figgered that with the herd stolen he could force the beef price even higher in this rich camp. Andross was to get the steers as *his* end. That's the low-down, I guess. Shall we make our call?"

"Let's go." Steve chuckled mirthlessly.

Toot Smith voiced *his* perfect agreement with a stanza of Rockin' T's battle song:

"Oh we're fightin' fools from the Rockin' T,
We are Curly, and Toot, and Bill Barbee,
Our ways they ain't sweet, and our manners ain't mild,
And we are gosh-awful woolly and wild;
Ki-yay! Ki-yay! Ki-yippy! Ki-yay!
We are gosh-awful woolly and wild!"

"I plumb agree with the sentiments, but not with the racket," said Beautiful Bill. "We're gettin' too close. Pipe down."

PASSING the pines, they slowed their mounts to a cautious walk. A little private road was leading them toward a glimmer of lamplight, and soon they were at the edge of a

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yard where several small outbuildings loomed in the starlight. Just ahead was a long log house, its windows shining in yellow squares. This was it!

"We'll leave the hosses here," said Bill Barbee.

Steve and Toot were quite willing to have their trusted pard take charge now, for they knew what he could do. There had always been something mysterious about Beautiful Bill, but one thing they *did* know about him—in a showdown he was the deadliest gun tiger of them all, a machine of nerveless steel who could deal out death in a way that was terrifying.

Tied to a tree near the house was a horse and buggy. The horses of Roxbury and the three bandits were evidently quartered in the stable, for Bill and his friends could hear stamping and champing noises from that direction.

Curly Steve, at Bill's suggestion, went skirmishing up toward the house to see what he could glimpse through the window. He came back with the information that all five of the plotters were inside and thus far seemed unsuspicious of anything.

"Rufe is talkin' to Gustman and they don't look happy," Steve murmured. "Andross and his two cronies are sittin' around a table playin' tag with some quart whiskey bottles, but they aren't drunk—enough."

"Glad of it," Bill said sardonically. "When I mix with anyone, I want him in his right mind. And by the way, Toot—"

"Aw, go to blazes; what little I drank has wore off," rumbled the erstwhile auctioneer. "Let's get started on this here business."

Bill had already planned the battle, and after a whispered conversation they got busy. Toot Smith crept up to the side of the cabin and flattened his powerful body close against the logs, just to the left of the door. Steve posted himself behind a tree some ten paces from the shanty, while Beautiful Bill untied Luther Gustman's nag. He gave the animal a slap and the horse and buggy started moving slowly, making considerable noise.

The upraised voices from within became silent. Then the door opened and the fat bulk of Gustman appeared. Behind him, holding an upraised lamp, stood Joe Hand.

"Yeah, your hoss has got loose," Hand was saying. "He's after the grass at the edge of the yard, I reckon."

The fat man swore petulantly and started to waddle across the clearing toward the strayed horse and buggy, which now had stopped. "I'll fix it if you hold the light, Joe. I thought I'd tight-hitched—"

Curly Steve suddenly stepped from behind the tree, and Luther's cherubic face became a big white blot in the moonlight. He opened his mouth to yell, but he was too late. Steve's right arm streaked out like a rapier, the punch landing like a whipcrack on Luther Gustman's double chins. It was a clean knockout, and Gustman went down with a sobbing gasp, rolling over on his big stomach.

With perfect timing, Toot lunged at Hand, the rustler with the lamp, at the same moment. "Come on!" he roared.

Joe Hand was a big man, but in Toot's grasp he was as powerless as a scarecrow. The tin lamp fell and went out, its chimney shattering, but there was another one inside the cabin, so that the attackers could see what they were doing. Still keeping his hold on Joe, Toot Smith jumped within the room, then moved to one side so Beautiful Bill

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could enter. Next in was Curly Steve.

"Them that draws—gits," said Bill Barbee, his strange face leering at the plotters like a gargoyle's.

Blacky Andross and Tony Nero, at opposite sides of a table in a corner, jumped incredulously to their feet and overturned a bottle of liquor. For a few tense seconds the gurgling of the spilling whiskey was all that broke the silence.

RUFE ROXBURY had been seated under the lamp, figuring with a pencil and pad. He dropped these now as he stood up. Rufe was armed—a holstered, pearl-handled

gun could be seen under his unbuttoned black coat.

"Now, boys, you must listen to reason," he began. His yellowish, wrinkled face was twitching and his greedy eyes had dilated with fear. "There's nothing to get excited about. I . . . I'll tear up your promissory note—"

Andross decided that this was no time for parley. "Kill these leppies! Burn 'em down! Tony—" His clawing hands jerked at his ivory-butted guns, and Tony Nero filled *his* hand at the same instant. They were asking for it!

"Oh, we're fightin' fools from the Rockin' T—"

As he roared the words, Toot tightened his relentless grip on the struggling Joe Hand, lifting him from the floor. Nero fired, and the slug smashed into Toot's human shield just as the big Rockin' T ranny hurled the screeching man at Andross and Nero. Andross managed to dodge sidewise in time, but the crazily flying body smashed into Tony Nero, knocking him to his haunches.

Beautiful Bill's stag-handled guns were out of the leather now, and he was closing in on Blacky Andross. Bill was crouched a little, his dropping left eye was almost closed, and he was grinning—as a wolf grins.

Flame and smoke streaked the room now, lengthwise and from side to side. The heavily built cabin shuddered from many explosions blended into one infernal roar. Yells and curses added to the fearful din as dust and splinters flew from the bullet-bitten walls.

Some of the slugs were finding their intended targets. Bill Barbee's expression did not change as a bullet seared the top of his left shoulder; in return his .45s belched livid flame—twice, and then again.

Blacky Andross had met his match at last, and his dark career of robbery and murder was finished; the curtain had fallen for him—the red-and-blue curtain of six-gun fire and smoke. The three holes in his chest were so close together that a playing card would have covered them. With the light fading from his greenish eyes, Andross sagged down in the corner, twitching like a dying spider.

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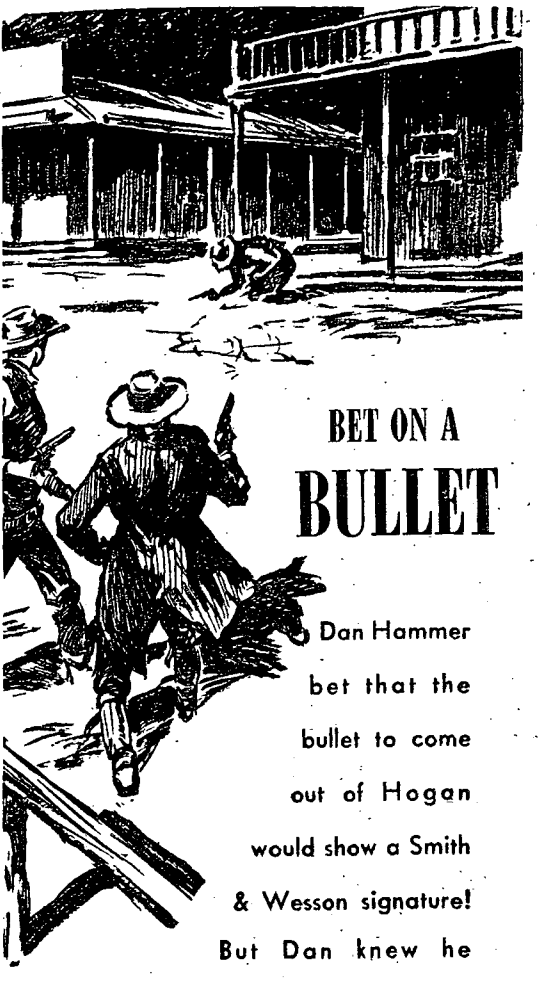
Tony Nero had scrambled to his feet. Toot was a big-enough target, but Nero's shot at him went awry. As usual, Toot Smith was trusting to his mighty fists, too angry to think of his gun, and Nero might have killed him if he had succeeded in getting a second shot. But Curly Steve was backing the play. At the thunder of his gun, Tony Nero lurched forward and fell across the table, dying. Mingled with the spilled liquor was flowing crimson.

"Don't try it, Rufe! Drop it!" warned Beautiful Bill.

The Spruce City moneylender could have lived if he had taken Bill's advice. He had got around Toot somehow, and he might have escaped into the darkness if he hadn't turned, gun in hand, in a venomous effort to kill. Instead, Bill Barbee's right-hand .45 got in the first, and last, word. It rocketed fire and smoke, and Rufe Roxbury's tall form shivered, twisted half around and fell lifeless across the threshold.

AT eleven o'clock the next morning the Fightin' Three were waiting on the depot platform, their business in Silver Dollar finished—and grim business some of it had been. On the tracks stood the three-car passenger and mail train that had just been made up. The pards had put their horses into the baggage car, getting special permission from the grateful railroad company, and they were anxious to get back to Spruce City and the Rockin' T Ranch. It would be half an hour, however, before the train pulled out, and the friends passed the time by talking to Jim Brooks. Jim wasn't coming with them—he was to stay over to take charge of his late uncle's body.

"We sure thank you, Jim," said Curly Steve. "We can't say we're sorry for Rufe—but it's too bad we had to do it."



BET ON A

BULLET

Dan Hammer bet that the bullet to come out of Hogan would show a Smith & Wesson signature! But Dan knew he wouldn't collect that bet unless that battered slug proved his innocence to the seething, lynch-primed mob clamoring for his life. SIX-GUN SIGNATURE is the smashing novel by E. B. Mann featured for February 6th.

WESTERN STORY

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"We don't usually treat our creditors thataway," drawled Beautiful Bill. "You'll fall heir to Rufe's property, I guess, bein' his only relative. And it's goin' to be a pleasure to trade a hunk of money for that mortgage note—which is yours now."

Toot Smith would have been in great good humor—had it not been for one thing. He couldn't forget that poker game on the freight train, and he kept mumbling about it. The remembrance of that was the only flaw in an otherwise perfect trip.

"I just saw that freight conductor and brakeman go into the depot," he groused. "I'll have to admit they're good—they're the best card players I ever run up against."

Beautiful Bill looked interested. "Yeah? I wouldn't mind a few hands of poker. I'll be back pretty soon," he said as he sauntered into the railroad station.

Time passed, and after Jim Brooks had said good-by and had gone uptown, Steve and Toot climbed into one of the passenger coaches to do their waiting.

Twenty minutes went by, and it was almost time for the train's departure. "I'm gettin' worried," Toot growled, with an anxious look at Steve.

"Bill can take pretty good care of himself." Curly Steve smiled as he laced a brown cigarette.

"Yeah, but he's got quite a lot of dinero on him, and them railroaders—"

"I've never seen anyone yet who could beat Beautiful Bill at draw or stud," Steve reassured him. "He doesn't . . . er . . . cheat, of course, but he's got educated fingers. And nobody can read that face of his. Here he comes now, and what did I tell you—by lookin' at him I can't tell if he won or lost."

"He lost, I feel it in my bones," said Toot with a groan as Beautiful Bill entered the car and took a seat opposite them.

"How much did you lose to them hombres, Toot?" asked Bill Barbee, after he had settled himself comfortably, crossed his legs and lighted a quirly.

"Thirty-two dollars and my gun."

"Here's the gun," Bill said, handing it over. "And here's the money," he added, peeling some bank notes from a thick wad and adding some silver. "Of course, I had to make a small profit for myself," he said modestly, while Toot Smith stared.

"What you got in that little bundle there?" Toot wanted to know.

"Oh, just a few things," said Beautiful Bill as he unwrapped it. "The depot agent sat in the game—this is his cap. Here's tickets to different places: one to Denver, one to El Paso, and one to Pocatello, Idaho. And here," he said, showing them a bright, nickel-plated object, "here's the conductor's fancy pliers to punch 'em with. Well, I guess the train's startin'."

There was a whistle blast from the engine, the coaches jerked forward, and in tune with the turning wheels the pards roared out in tuneful song:

"Oh, we are three pards from the Rockin' T,
Our names they are Curly, and Toot, and Bill Barbee!
We hit when we shoot and we scratch and we bite,
And there's nothin' we crave so much as a fight!
Ki-yay, ki-yay! Yi-yippy, ki-yay!
There's nothin' we crave so much as a fight!"

The Fightin' Three will be back soon for another gripping, gun-blazing showdown with the devil. Watch for them in Street & Smith's Wild West!

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COW COUNTRY SPANISH

by S. OMAR BARKER

XX. Sun, Moon, Months, Money and Miscellaneous.

El sol (ale sole): the sun.

La luna (lah LOO-nah): the moon.

Las estrellas (lahss ay-STRAYL-yahss): the stars.

Los cielos (loce see-AY-loce): the heavens.

El cielo (ale see-AY-loh): the sky; heaven.

El infierno (ale een-fee-AYR-noh): Hades.

El mundo (ale MOON-doh): the world.

La tierra (lah tee-AYR-rah): the earth.

Reloj (ray-LOH): clock; watch. Often pronounced ray-LOCE.

Reloj de los Yaquis (ray-LOH day loce YAH-keece): clock of the Yaqui Indians; the stars at night, particularly the Big Dipper, by which old-time cowboys as well as Indians could tell time with remarkable accuracy.

Todo el mundo (TOH-thoh ale MOON-doh): everybody.

Se levanta el sol (say lay-VAHN-tah ale sole): the sun rises.

Se pone el sol (say POH-nay ale sole): the sun is setting.

Amanece el día (ah-mah-NAY-say ale DEE-ah): day breaks.

Al amanecer (ahl ah-mahn-ay-SAYR): at daybreak.

Hoy (oy): today.

Ayer (ah-YAIR): yesterday.

Mañana (mahn-YAH-nah): tomorrow.

Antier (ahn-tee-AYR): day before yesterday.

Pasado mañana (pah-SAH-doh mahn-YAH-nah): day after tomorrow.

Enero (ay-NAY-ro): January.

Febrero (fay-BRAY-ro): February.

Marzo (MAHR-soh): March.

Abril (ah-BREEL): April.

Mayo (MAY-yoh): May.

Junio (HOON-ee-oh): June.

Julio (HOO-lee-oh): July.

Agosto (ah-GOH-stoh): August.

Septiembre (sape-tee-AIM-bray): September.

Octubre (oke-TOO-bray): October.

Noviembre (noh-vee-AIM-bray): November.

Día de gracias (DEE-ah day GRAH-see-ahss) Thanksgiving Day.

Pascuas (PAHSS-kwahss): Easter.

Semana Santa (say-MAH-nah SAHN-tah): Holy Week.

To be continued in our next issue.

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"I found Lon dead over at our fence line," Upshaw declared.

SODBUSTER SHOWDOWN

by MELVIN W. HOLT

The case of that hot-tempered young deputy would probably go down in history as the first time that absent-mindedness was used as a hole card

A SHERIFF'S troubles are never over until he's planted in boothill or loses his star at election. Take this morning, for instance. I was taking life easy down in front of the Five Aces Saloon, spinning yarns with a couple of the old-timers. First time in two weeks I'd had a chance to lay off the job and take a much-needed breathing spell—and look what happened.

But I should have known better than to expect any peace around this mushrooming little cow town of Gunsight. Just when I had myself leaned up comfortably against the saloon wall and started enjoying a good cigar, old Warbag Simpson pointed down Main Street and said to me:

"Looks like Charley Upshaw coming yonder, Mort. Who's that dead-looking jigger he's got with him?"

Sure enough, it was Charley Up-

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shaw, part owner of the C U Bar brand over in Pear Valley, riding into town on that handsome-looking steeldust of his. He was trailing another cayuse along behind him with somebody tied across the saddle, arms and legs dangling.

"What's up, Upshaw?" I yelled as I got up and ventured out into the hot sunlight to meet him.

Upshaw was never very pleasant-natured, and right then his face—which was considerable scratched up, I noticed—looked dark and threatening as a thunderhead. He nodded his bullet-shaped head back toward the hombre he'd towed into town.

"Plenty," he said coldly. "Lon Colter's been murdered. Take a look, sheriff."

That was sure bad news. Lon Colter, the other half of the C U Bar partnership, had been known around the range side as one square shooter.

I stepped closer to examine Upshaw's freight. It was Lon Colter, all right—and plenty dead. There was an ugly bullet hole in the side of his head just above the right ear, and his hair was crusted with dried blood.

"It's bushwhack!" Upshaw fumed. "And you got that sneaking sodbuster, Satterwhite, to thank for it!"

Charley Upshaw despised all sodbusters in general, and one in particular—old Sam Satterwhite. Sam and his younker own a hundred and sixty acres of land over on Cherry Creek, which runs east of the C U Bar. Lon Colter had always been pretty neighborly with them, but there's not a drop of tolerant blood in Upshaw's body. He's about as neighborly as a catamount.

"Satterwhite?" I gasped. "You mean he done this?"

"Open-and-shut case," Upshaw declared. "Lon went for a ride last yesterday evening and didn't come back all night, so this morning I went out looking for him. Found him like this, over at our east fence line, bushwhacked. The fence had been cut, and I could see where somebody had hazed cattle through the break from our range—and the tracks led straight toward Satterwhite's place. Lon must have caught Satterwhite red-handed stealing our cattle."

It was a serious accusation to make, but it looked like Upshaw might be right. Of course, I'd never figured Satterwhite was ornery enough to be a cow thief or a bushwhacker, but I knew he was a right salty old jasper, at that.

"I decided maybe I'd better come straight to you and let the law handle this," said Upshaw. "I hate sodbusters worse'n I hate rattlesnakes, but I don't hanker to have Satterwhite's blood on my hands, which is what would probably happen if I went to his place by myself."

"Take Lon's remains down to the coroner's office," I told him. "I'll go fetch my deputy, and we'll ride out and pay Satterwhite a little visit."

Upshaw nodded and rode on down the street, and I ambled back to the office.

I'D been bothered considerable about that red-headed, freckle-faced, absent-minded, long-legged deputy of mine, Mike O'Leary, who was now reposing in my swivel chair, busy oiling his six-shooter, his size-thirteen boots propped up on the desk top like *he* was the ramrod of Apache County's law-and-order business.

"Get them feet down, you long drink of stale water," I snapped. "We got work to do."

After I'd finished telling him Up-

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shaw's version of the crime, Mike threw down the oily rag he'd been using and holstered his gun.

"Always something to take the joy out of life," he lamented. "You don't figure Satterwhite's that kind of skunk, do you? Shucks, Lon Colter's the only rancher in these parts that ever gave Satterwhite a square deal. Me, I don't think the sodbuster done it."

"You just don't think, anyway," I snapped.

By the time we were saddled up and ready to ride, Upshaw was back from the coroner's. Mike O'Leary spat scornfully when Upshaw rode up, and the rancher growled in his throat like a sullen grizzly.

A couple of weeks back Upshaw had gone on a drunken spree in the Five Aces Saloon and tried to shoot the place full of holes—and might have succeeded if Mike hadn't come in and lulled Upshaw to sleep with the butt of his gun. Which explained the hostile feeling between them.

"Howdy, Charley," Mike greeted sarcastically. "Been behaving yourself lately?"

Upshaw's face reddened. He slid off his bronc and started toward Mike.

"Listen, O'Leary," he snarled, "you mind your own business! What I can't savvy is how a sassy, wet-behind-the-ears maverick like you ever got to be a deputy sheriff. Always trying to stir up new trouble, you skinny, half-witted—"

Mike's Irish temper exploded then, which isn't very unusual. He took a quick step forward and knocked Upshaw into the dust with a looping right fist. Upshaw got up and rubbed his aching jaw, then charged toward Mike, rumbling like a mad bull. But I stepped between them and nipped the little ruckus in the bud.

"Simmer down, you two!" I ordered. "We got enough trouble already."

I glared at Mike and shoved Upshaw toward his bronc.

"Guess you're right, sheriff," Upshaw said grudgingly as he climbed into the saddle. "But why not leave that deputy behind? My pardner's been murdered, and I got other things to think about besides keeping that scatterbrained fool in his place. So have you."

That suited me fine. I was disgusted with the headstrong young galoot myself, so I ordered him to stay in town and just watch over things while I was gone.

It was a fitting punishment, because Mike hates to miss excitement worse than he hates to miss courting his best gal. Upshaw and I rode out of town and left him standing there at the hitch rack with a hurt look on his face, and all the bystanders laughing up their sleeves.

IT'S a ten-mile jaunt out to Satterwhite's place. The sun was getting hotter than Satan's cookstove, so we let our cayuses take it easy along the way, and it was well past noon when he topped the last ridge and came within sight of the sodbsuter's sorry-looking cabin, down in the middle of a big cornfield.

Upshaw's dark face showed bitter contempt as he looked the place over. The old buzzard!" he growled. "Cluttering up good cow range with his corn and potatoes and stuff. It's a shame. But after today he won't be around to plant nothing else, thank goodness."

We rode down the slope and took the trail that leads through the field toward the cabin. I noticed that Upshaw's features were getting red

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again, and his hand was resting on his gun butt.

I turned and started to tell him to calm down, but just then a rifle spoke from a window of the cabin and a bullet whizzed between us like an angry hornet. Without wasting any time, we dived from our saddles and squatted down in the cover of the thick cornstalks.

"We don't want any visitors!" a high-pitched yell drifted from the cabin. "Get back on them cayuses and light a shuck away from here!" It was Satterwhite's kid, Lucius.

Before I knew what was happening, Charley Upshaw had raised up and triggered three fast shots, and I heard the tinkle of a broken window glass over at the cabin.

"Kill my pard, will you?" Upshaw raged. "I'll fix you, you dirty, sneaking sodbusting—"

He broke off and hunkered down beside me again as another rifle slug chewed a cornstalk in two just above our heads.

"Got you spotted!" Lucius Satterwhite yelled. "You'd better clear out, or I'll pepped you with hot lead, instead of just trying to scare you!"

I ignored the threat for a minute and turned to Upshaw.

"Better hand me that gun," I advised him, "before you get both of us shot. We didn't come here to start no gun fight. Let me handle this."

Upshaw didn't cotton to the idea at first, so I aimed my gun at him sore of carelesslike and asked him again. He handed his shooting iron over without any further argument, and I tucked it under my belt.

"Hey, Lucius!" I yelled to the cabin. "Ease up on that trigger. Sheriff Payton speaking. For a younker, you shoot pretty good with that squirrel gun."

"I didn't recognize *you*, sheriff," the kid apologized. "You ought to be more particular who you hobnob with, though. We been expecting a call from Upshaw. I found a bunch of C U Bar cattle on our land this morning, back in the brush down on Cherry Creek. Pa says he figures somebody is trying to frame us for rustling!"

"Where's your dad now?" I asked.

"In here with me," Lucius answered.

"Probably hiding under the bed, letting his button do his fighting for him," Upshaw growled. "The kid's lying, sheriff, trying to save his old man's dirty neck from a hang rope."

"Listen, Lucius, I'm getting tired of yelling myself hoarse out here in this danged cornfield," I told the sodbuster kid. "We're coming in for a little palaver."

"All right," Lucius agreed. "But if Upshaw starts acting up, I'm plumb liable to fill his thick hide with holes!"

JUST as Upshaw and I was climbing back on our broncs, we heard another rider coming up behind us through the cornfield. Danged if it wasn't that carrot-topped Mike O'Leary. He gave me a good-natured wink and grinned at Upshaw like Upshaw was the best amigo he had, and right away I got a notion that he was up to something.

"Just to refersh your memory, I told you to stay in town," I reminded Mike. I guess I must have been pretty hot under the collar at the time, and that impudent grin on his devilsh face didn't help matters any.

"Shucks, boss, I'll be good," Mike cooed. "I rode like blazes trying to catch up to you, but it looks like I've already missed some of the fireworks."

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"Dang you, Mike, you've pulled your very last shenanigan on me," I said. "When we get back to town, you're fired! And you can bet your boots the next deputy I hire will have a little sense and know how to take orders from me."

Mike's temper started roweling him again. His grin disappeared quickly and he started to wheel his cayuse and ride off, but I stopped him.

"You needn't consider yourself fired till we get back to town, unless you want to quit now," I said seriously. "You can come along with us, if it won't rub your fur too much the wrong way. Might could use you, at that."

Mike's stubborn, but he relented and agreed to come along, so the three of us rode on over to the sodbuster's shack and dismounted, Charley Upshaw looking very displeased but keeping his mouth shut.

Lucius Satterwhite was standing in the door watching us with impish eyes, the rifle in the crook of his arm. The kid's not over fourteen or fifteen, but he had a quid of tobacco in his jaw that would choke a mule. He looked Upshaw in the eye and shot a stream of brown tobacco juice straight between Upshaw's boots. The rancher didn't say anything, but he looked fit to be tied, and I'll wager he was wishing he had his gun back for a minute or two.

"Was I right, sheriff?" Lucius wanted to know. "Upshaw bring you out here to arrest my pa for stealing cattle?"

"Not just for *that*," Upshaw sneered. "He killed Lon Colter, as well."

The kid was quiet for a minute. "If Mr. Colter's dead, we're plumb sorry to hear it," he said then. "But pa couldn't be the one that done it, anyway. In the first place, he's twenty times more a real *man* than you are, you highhanded cow nurse. In the second place, he's laid up in bed with a busted leg."

"What!" Upshaw suddenly was looking mighty disappointed.

"Have a look-see for yourself, if you think I'm lying," invited Lucius. He turned and went inside, and we followed him in.

Sure enough, there was gray-bearded old Sam Satterwhite, propped up on the bed with nothing on but his red flannel underwear. His left leg was splinted and wrapped in white bandages.

He said howdy to Mike and me, gave Upshaw a hard look.

"Pa, you hear what they said?" Lucius asked.

Satterwhite nodded grimly. "I heard. Sorry to upset your apple cart, Upshaw," he mocked, "but it looks like you're barking up the wrong tree. Does it seem likely that I could fork a hoss and commit all them crimes—with a bum leg?"

UPSHAW was stumped, but only for a second or two. "That's no alibi, sheriff!" he roared to me. "He coulda busted his leg *after* he stole the cattle and drilled Lon. *If* the leg's really busted."

The gray-bearded old nester chuckled like a poker player raking in a sizable pot.

"Wrong again," he said. "This leg was busted three days ago. I climbed up on the cabin to patch a hole in the roof, and slipped and fell off. Ask old Doc Murphy in Gunsight. Lucius rode into town and fetched him right after it happened. Doc put on this wrapping for me."

The color of Upshaw's face had changed from red to purple.

"Seeing as how your kid is so handy with a gun, he musta pulled

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the job by himself, then!" he blurted.

That remark got under Satterwhite's skin in a hurry.

"Hand me that rifle, Lucius," he commanded. "No skunk is going to shoot off his filthy mouth like that about my son and get away with it!"

Lucius started across the room, tickled to oblige, but I stopped him and took the rifle away from him. As to solving the case, I seemed to be getting nowhere. Then Mike O'Leary spoke up.

"Sam, you own a six-shooter?" he asked.

The sodbuster shook his head. "I'm a peace-loving man," he said. "That rifle is the only shooting iron on the place, and we don't use it for nothing but killing the crows and rabbits that bother my crops."

"What's *that* got to do with it, anyway?" Charley Upshaw horned in quickly.

"Nothing much," Mike told him, "except that I went down to the coroner's office before I left town, and he says Lon Colter was shot with a Colt. 45. That's all."

Upshaw stuck his thumbs under his gun belt and walked over in front of Mike, swaggering like he owned the whole county.

"Are you upholding this farmer?" he demanded, his voice low and threatening.

"I ain't upholding anybody," Mike let him know, "but I'm trying to uphold justice, and it appears to me that you don't hanker to see Satterwhite get a square deal."

"Supposing there ain't a six-shooter around here, like he says," Upshaw tried to reason. "Couldn't the kid steal one somewhere, and hide it out after he bushwhacked Lon?"

"Which brings up another point," Mike remarked. "Seems like Lon wasn't bushwhacked at all. I helped the coroner examine his corpse. There was powder burns around the bullet wound on his head, proving that the shot was fired only a few feet away from him. Another thing: the hole was in the side of his head, but the coroner says the bullet tore through at an angle, which means the killer musta been standing almost in front of Lon!"

THAT was straight talk, and Upshaw didn't seem to like it. His hand dropped to his holster, then he remembered that I had his gun.

"Sheriff, how long are you going to let this go on?" he thundered. "Since when did this half-baked deputy get to be a detective?"

That half-baked deputy seemed to be doing all right, so I kept my lip buttoned. Satterwhite and the kid were enjoying it, too.

"One more thing, sheriff," Mike continued, looking at me. "Colter's face was kind of battered up, like he'd been in a fist fight. If you'll notice, Upshaw's got a few marks on *his* face, too, and it ain't all caused by that right hook I handed him this morning. My theory is that the two of them got into a hot argument over something, *and Upshaw killed Colter himself!* By framing it onto Satterwhite, like he's been trying to do, he'd be killing two birds with one stone!"

That was the answer! Why didn't I think of it myself? But Upshaw had acted so danged sure of himself—his story had sounded so convincing.

Matter of fact, I was so surprised for a second or two that I wasn't prepared for what happened next. Neither was Mike. Lucius Satterwhite yelped a warning, but too late.

Quick as a flash, Charley Upshaw leaped forward, snatched Mike's gun from the leather and got the drop on all four of us!

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"All right—I killed Colter," he snarled. "I wanted to drive Satterwhite off this place and take over the Cherry Creek water rights, but Colter didn't see it that way. So we fought, and I killed the soft-hearted, nester-loving fool, just like I'm going to kill all of you. Put down that rifle, sheriff. Shed the rest of the hardware, too, including my six-shooter."

I sure hated to do it, but there was no other choice. Upshaw's finger was tight on the trigger of Mike's gun, and he wasn't bluffing.

"What you driving at, Upshaw?" I asked him after I'd shucked the artillery. "You're in this mess up to yours ears now. Might as well give yourself up."

"I'm no fool," he taunted. "I can still see a way out. Listen to this: I can kill you and O'Leary with the sodbuster's rifle, then finish him off and the kid with a six-shooter. Then I'll go back to town and tell everybody Satterwhite put up a fight and killed you two badge toters, and I had to kill him and the kid to save my own skin. That way, nobody'll ever be able to prove a thing on me."

Upshaw had called my hand with the cold-bloodest scheme I'd ever heard of. And, as he stated, there wouldn't be even a thread of evidence against him if he worked it right.

That lobo look on his face wasn't pretty to see. No doubt about it, he's a killer when riled, and he was plenty riled then.

FOR a minute the cabin was as quiet as a graveyard on a dark night. I looked at Satterwhite and his boy. The old nester was sitting straight up on the bed, face the color of putty, fists clenched hard, bracing himself against the bullet that would be snatching his life away at any moment. The kid was biting his lip and gazing wishfully at the rifle on the floor. Then I looked at Mike—

The danged fool was grinning!

"Upshaw," he said, chuckling, "I just remembered something that's going to make you mighty unhappy."

I couldn't see any humor in the jackpot we were in, so naturally I figured Mike had gone completely loco. Upshaw probably figured likewise, the funny way he eyed Mike.

Then things happened fast. Mike started moving forward, and Upshaw cursed and jerked the trigger. But the gun snapped, like there was something wrong with the firing pin!

Before Upshaw could trigger again, Mike hung another terrific haymaker on the skunk's jaw that crackled like a whiplash. Upshaw flopped on the floor like a pole-axed dogie, out cold.

Sam Satterwhite and I heaved a mutal sigh of relief. Lucius whooped joyfully, snatched a rope from a peg on the wall and began binding Upshaw's hands together behind his back. Mike looked at me and grinned again, rubbing his trusty right fist to restore the feeling. Without asking, he well knew he could keep his deputy sheriffing job for as long as he wanted it.

"What was so danged funny, you grinning hyena?" I inquired. "If that worn-out old six-shooter of yours hadn't failed to work, you'd be as dead as Lon Colter by now."

"Nothing wrong with that gun," Mike said. "If you recall, I was oiling it when you came busting into the office this morning with the news of Colter's death. A man's liable to do funny things when he gets excited. That's how come I forgot to reload the gun!"

THE END.

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THE SEVEN-HORSE STRING

by GEORGE C. FRANKLIN

Of the utmost importance to men who live on horses is the care of the animal's back. Anyone who has ever suffered the pain caused by a poorly fitted shoe, or even a wrinkled sock, will appreciate the necessity for this care. The problem had more to do with the old seven-horse string of the early cowboys than any other one thing. If the back of a horse is bruised by an accident or "scalded" by sweat so that the muscles begin to puff, a day or two of complete rest is necessary. No amount of doctoring will serve as well, so in a land where horses were plentiful and feed cost nothing, each man had seven horses in a week.

Another thing was the matter of shoeing—a big problem in later days when horses were kept up and fed and few outfits furnished more than three horses to a cowboy. Clearly it would have been impossible to shoe a remuda of fifty or seventy-five horses on a trail several hundred miles long, but if a horse was ridden but one day out of seven and during the rest of the time was permitted to loaf along over ground he could pick for himself, his hoofs seldom got tender. This was especially true of the wiry little mustangs that made up a large proportion of the saddle stock of the old Texas trails.

The judgment of a cowboy in selecting and training the animals in his string was as important as any other part of his work. On the long trails, night horses were the most important. Such animals must be sure-footed, intelligent and brave. Endurance and ability to turn quickly were important, but willingness to face the unknown by running in the darkness, trusting entirely to the judgment of the rider, was essential. This last quality depended to a large extent upon the character of the rider. No animal is more sensitive to the mental condition of his human associates than is the smart cow horse.

Next to the night horse came the highly trained, sensitive cutting horse. Here strength and endurance were of no importance, since there were always plenty of men anxious to take part in the exciting work. These horses were taught to rely more upon their own judgment in cutting out a madly plunging, dodging steer than on the guidance of the rider. Once they were shown the cow that was to be cut, the top cutting horse took over, manipulated the animal toward the edge of the herd and then with a few quick, certain movements headed it toward the cut where the helpers could finish the job.

All cow horses were taught to hold a roped animal and to give slack only when told to do so. The cowboy who possessed a safe night horse and a top cutter felt that he had the foundation for a good string, although he was always seeking understudies for the pets he boasted about.

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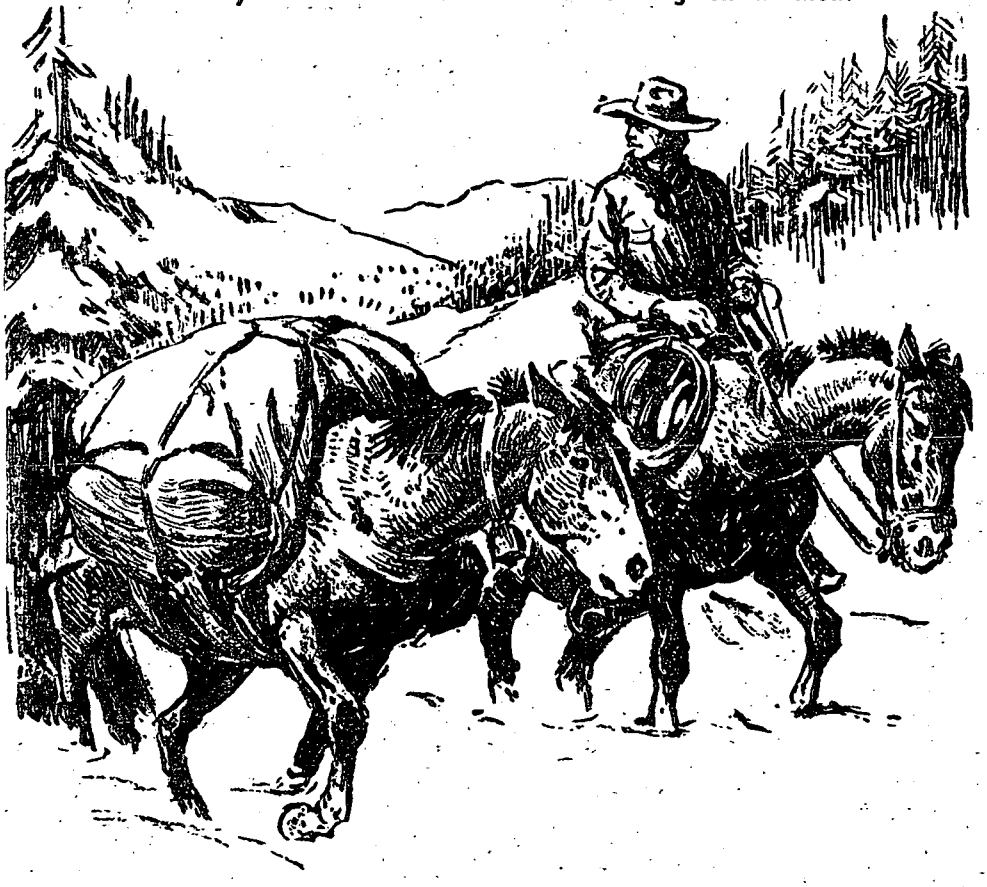
BLIZZARD BUSCADERO

by HAL DUNNING

The White Wolf had seen plenty trickery in his day—but he'd ride far before he saw anything to equal the treachery of those two harmless-looking snow men!



CHAPTER I.

SNOW MEN DON'T TALK.

Two snow men guarded the slab door of the log cabin which had been the bunkhouse of the owners of the Three Brothers Mine. Out here in the blizzard-swept Tetons, fifty miles from the nearest habitation in Jackson's Hole, the snow effigies seemed strangely out of place. They were the type of snow-modeled dummies children would be expected to build in their front yards after a city snowfall: a three-foot snowball for legs, a smaller one for a torso, a third snowball the size of a melon for a head.

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But there were no children in the region of Glacier Pass where the Three Brothers Mine was located. There was no visible evidence that the gold diggings were occupied at all, now that snow was flying along the Continental Divide. No smoke wisped from the cold stone chimney of the bunkhouse. Ten-foot drifts were banked against the north wall of the shack, and no trail had been broken to the nearby shaft house, perched against the mountainside, nor to the sod-roofed stable over by the mine's muck heaps, rounded over now by a soft mantle of new snow.

Yet human hands had constructed those snow men—and recently, too, for the premature blizzard which had locked the Teton range in a grip of snow and ice had blown itself out only that morning.

One of the snow men wore a flop-brimmed Stetson. Its eyes were beer-bottle caps poked into the snowball face, its nose a red cartridge from a shotgun, and its grinning teeth fangs plucked from the jawbone of a panther's skull.

The other snow man was decked out more elaborately. Its head was garbed with a coon-skin cap, the nose was a dwarf pine cone; and a corncob pipe, stoked with tobacco, was jabbed in the mouth. Propped under the effigy's arm was a well-oiled .30-30 rifle, fully loaded and much too good to be exposed to the winter weather.

Whoever had constructed the two snow men had put in a lot of time and energy at the job, considering that it was unlikely that human eyes would view his handiwork before the spring thaws melted the dummies.

Since the blizzard had spent itself around sunup that morning, there had been two spectators to admire the crude sculpture: a gaunt-flanked timber wolf which had come out of the snow-wigged pine forest to sniff around the snow men as if to find out if they were flesh and blood; and a Rocky Mountain buzzard, which had wheeled down from a lofty crag back on the summit and had settled close enough to one of the snow men to leave the marks of its talons on a snowy shoulder.

The timber wolf had scared away the winged scavenger of the skies and had started pawing at the snow which formed the base of the rifle-toting snow man when the lobo, in turn, was frightened off the gold-mine premises by the sound of two horses approaching up the mountainside from the direction of the Glacier Pass road.

Before loping back to its den somewhere in the conifers, the lobo had settled briefly on its haunches, thrown back its furry neck and given vent to a long, quavering howl—a howl of death, the Indians would have called it. The eerie, lingering echoes of the wolf's howl reached the ears of the sheepskin-coated rider who came into the open clearing below the Three Brothers Mine at that moment.

IT seemed incredible that a horseman, trailing a pack mare, should be traveling Glacier Pass while a blizzard was blocking the Jackson's Hole road for the winter. As a matter of fact, Jim-twin Allen counted himself lucky to be laying eyes on a human habitation, this morning.

The blizzard had been premature by a good thirty days, otherwise Allen would not have braved the twelve-thousand-foot pass in October. Only an hour ago—when he had found a weather-beaten signpost jutting out of a snowbank informing him that the Three Brothers Mine was but half a mile to the south—Allen had given himself only

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a fifty-fifty chance of getting out of the Tetons alive.

There had been times, when the blizzard was at the height of its fury, that Allen—better known by his outlaw nickname of the White Wolf—had toyed with the idea of abandoning his two gray ponies and taking his chances of escaping on foot. But such a decision had proved impossible. A posse-hounded outcast for more years than he cared to look back on, the White Wolf had come to rely upon Gray Comet and Princess as he had never relied on any human.

In all Wyoming, there was but one hombre the White Wolf dared trust. It was odd that that man was on the opposite side of the law: Jim's twin brother Jack, the sheriff of Pinecone town over in the Thundergust country.

It had been more than a year since the White Wolf had seen his star-toting twin. He was headed for Pinecone by the shortcut of Glacier Pass when the blizzard had struck day before yesterday.

Holing up until the blizard spent itself, Allen and his two grays had escaped freezing by a miracle. The outlaw owed his life now to the fact that a herd of bull elk, likewise trapped by the premature blizzard, had broken trail for him as far as the Three Brothers signpost.

"Halloo, the house!"

Jim-twin Allen's yell was answered by a ghostly echo, as he slogged through hip-deep drifts, leading his saddle pony. Allen was on the verge of exhaustion, his bones aching to the marrow, his blood thinned by more than a year down in the cactus country of Arizona and California. Clad in batwing chaps, stilt-heeled cow boots, a cone-crowned Stetson and a fleece-lined coat of horsehide, Allen was not dressed to buck a blizzard in the first place.

But sight of the Three Brothers shaft house and the log bunkhouse with its stone fireplace loaned strength to the White Wolf as he pushed his way up to one corner of the cabin and dropped Gray Comet's reins. The pack-laden mare, Princess, came to a dejected halt behind the saddle horse.

In the bitter cold of the mountain air, Allen's nostrils exuded twin spirals of white vapor, which clung to the air like smoke spewing from gun bores as he fought his way around to the front of the bunkhouse.

There, the White Wolf was arrested in his tracks by the ludicrous spectacle of the two snow men, standing like petrified sentinels on either side of the slab door.

A grin spread Allen's purpled lips as he slogged forward to stand between the two effigies. These snow men had been put here but recently—this very morning, no doubt. That meant that the Three Brothers Mine had not been closed for the winter as he had been dreading.

"Anybody home, Ca'tridge Nose?" the White Wolf inquired facetiously, bowing to the right-hand snow man.

Hammering on the door with a buckskin-gauntleted hand, Allen got no reply. He jerked the rawhide latch string, then saw that the door had been fastened by a heavy brass padlock.

"That means the Three Brothers have pulled out to keep from bein' snowed in for the winter," grunted Allen, unsnapping his horsehide coat to clear the stocks of his holstered Colts. "Under the circumstances, I reckon I'm justified in bustin' in. I got to have food an' shelter, an' pronto."

A well-aimed slug from his .45 shattered the padlock, and a mo-

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ment later Jim-twin Allen was shoving the door inward on its hinges.

WITH sunlight pouring into the one-roomed cabin, the White Wolf halted stock-still on the threshold. Before him were the signs of catastrophe.

Half-dried pools of blood smeared the puncheon floor. A table had been overturned, littering the cabin with playing cards, broken whiskey bottles and a shattered lamp. A chair had been smashed to kindling wood, over by the cold fireplace, and ejected cartridges from a .32-calibered gun lay about the floor.

Jaw hardening, the White Wolf withdrew a Colt .45 once more from its holster and stepped tensely into the room.

His all-inclusive glance raked the cabin, revealed three bunks covered with tousled Hudson's Bay blankets and buffalo robes, told him that no dead or injured men were there. The bunkhouse was deserted, except for the two snow men standing guard outside—

"Hades has sure busted loose in here, an' plumb lately," Allen muttered, going back outside. His yellow-flecked eyes, turned up at the corners like a wolf's, regarded the two snow men narrowly. "These snow hombres could prob'ly tell what happened here, but snow men don't talk, no more'n dead men."

Turning with the intention of going back to his horses, Jim-twin Allen's shoulder accidently brushed against the side of the snow man he had dubbed Cartridge Nose. In so doing, a segment of snow broke loose from the dummy's torso—to reveal something which brought an oath of horror from the Wolf's lips.

Dangling down the snow man's side was a human hand and arm, clad in a red flannel sleeve—a fist with black and broken nails, heavy calluses, and with blood frozen in the palm.

For the space of a dozen seconds, the White Wolf stood staring at the cold-stiffened human arm. He saw, now, why a wolf had been attracted to the snow man.

A shudder rippled down Allen's spine as he forced himself to peck at the snow man's head with the butt of his six-gun. The mask of hard-packed snow chipped away—to reveal the face of a corpse with staring eyes and a brindle-colored beard. A corpse with a bullet hole drilled neatly through the forehead!

Sick with revulsion, the White Wolf felt himself drawn irresistibly to Cartridge Nose's twin. Dreading his task, yet impelled to go about it, the White Wolf scraped snow from the head which boasted a coonskin cap and a corncob pipe and a pine-cone nose.

Allen was not surprised to find that the second snow man was likewise the sculptured coffin of another corpse. The face exposed by his swiping gun butt was a dead ringer for the first, except that the beard was cinnamon-red, and congealed blood had leaked in a wriggly rivulet from a bullet hole in the temple.

CHAPTER II.

MOUNTAIN MYSTERY.

THE White Wolf felt an overpowering desire to get away from the two corpses. Not until he was back with his gray ponies, around the corner of the bunkhouse, did the outlaw pause to rationalize the situation.

"There was a big ruckus inside the cabin, an' those two buskies were murdered," Allen muttered. "Whoever done the killin' drug his victims outside an' propped 'em up

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an' turned 'em into snow men. Looks like the work of a loco fiend."

The killer, then, might still be lurking around the mine premises. The fact that there had been a padlock on the door, however, pointed to the likelihood that the third hombre had vamoosed following his macabre sculptury.

"The third hombre!" Allen exclaimed. "This is the Three Brothers Mine—maybe the dead hombres were two o' the brothers an' the third was the one who murdered 'em!"

A protesting snort from Princess, the pack-laden mare, jerked Allen back to reality and reminded him that his ponies were in dire need of shelter and feed. Catching sight of the stable shed over by the muck heaps, the White Wolf dismissed the riddle of the snow-man corpses for the time being and broke trail for his two horses until he got them safely under the sod roof of the mine stable.

Forking down dry mountain hay from the stable loft, Allen bedded down the exhausted grays and stripped off their saddles. Then, shouldering his *alforja* bags, the waddy headed back toward the murder shack.

He had not gone a dozen yards before his eyes were attracted to a jet of white vapor which wafted up through a hole in the broken crust of a snowdrift a short distance down the hillside below the cabin. Heaving the saddlebags into the snow, Jim-twin Allen pushed his way down the slope, a six-gun alert in one gloved fist. Nearing the depression in the snow, the outlaw spotted a set of snowshoe tracks which led from the cabin entrance, a fairly fresh trail which he had not noticed at the moment of his arrival.

"Somebody's under that drift," muttered the waddy. "That vapor is his breath!"

A moment later Jim-twin Allen was staring down into a hole which reminded him of a grave. A few rusty tin cans told him that the excavation had been used for garbage disposal by the three brothers and their miners.

Crumpled in the hole, surrounded by rotten pine planking which had given away under his weight, was a man dressed in a green Mackinaw, foxed buckskin pants and laced, knee-high mountaineer boots, on which were buckled long, tapering snowshoes.

The hombre was unconscious. A raw welt on his skull showed where the man, in pitching into the snow-covered garbage pit, had been knocked out when he hit one of the timbers which formed a lid over the hole.

"This is the killer, most likely!" Allen grunted bleakly, as he knelt beside the excavation and reached down to get a firm grip on the unconscious man's left arm. "He must have run into this garbage dump when he was makin' his getaway."

DISPLAYING rare strength for a gaunted hombre who scaled less than a hundred and thirty, the White Wolf jackknifed his limp burden over a shoulder and stumbled back to the house, his eyes avoiding the gruesome dead faces which protruded from the round-bellied snow men. The death-glazed eyes of the corpses seemed to follow the insensible man accusingly, as Allen reeled into the interior of the bunkhouse and deposited his groaning burden on one of the three bunks, first removing the man's awkward snowshoes.

Stripping off the man's Mackinaw, the waddy brushed loose snow off a

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face that was smooth-shaven and blue with cold. A moment's search revealed a .45 six-gun holstered at the man's hip. The gun was crammed into the scabbard, which was strangely small and did not seem to have been built to accommodate the Peacemaker.

Hunting around the bloodstained room, the White Wolf located a sealed bottle of whiskey on a wall shelf. Uncorking the bottle, Allen forced some of the fiery liquor between the hombre's teeth. The man sputtered and coughed, then opened a pair of pale-green eyes. Terror was written there, as the man propped himself up on one elbow and stared wildly about him.

Then, before the White Wolf could speak, the hombre slumped back in a faint.

"We'll git your version o' this shoot-out when you come to, jasper!" Allen clipped. "But if you're the galoot who fixed up them snow men, be danged if I know what to do with you. An owlhooter couldn't very well turn another owlhooter over to the law without gettin' hisself in a jam."

Placing the man's six-gun on a high shelf above the fireplace mantel and making sure there were no other firearms about the cabin which the suspected killer could obtain, the White Wolf headed back outdoors to get his saddlebags.

When he returned to the threshold which was guarded by the grisly snow-shrouded corpses, it was to find his patient standing in the doorway, supporting himself with outspread arms against either door jamb.

A crooked grin relaxed the hombre's features as he saw the White Wolf halt, a hand dropping instinctively to gun butt.

"I thought . . . for a minute . . . you was the hombre who done the killing here, stranger!" faltered the man. "But I can see . . . you ain't Lige Butterfield."

Allen's brows gathered in a frown. He saw the stranger jerk his head toward the two snow men.

"You didn't pack Lenny an' Lute . . . in snow thataway, did you?" went on the stranger. "The last I seen of 'em they was welterin' in their own gore . . . inside the shack here."

The stranger stepped back inside as the White Wolf came in. Suspicion was smoldering in Allen's narrowed gaze as he saw the hombre slump into a rawhide-bottomed chair.

"Supposin' you start at the beginnin', stranger," invited Jim-twin Allen grimly, "an' set me straight about this business. Who are you? What were you doin' in that garbage pit I hauled you out of?"

The stranger drew a trembling hand over his eyes, then rummaged in a shirt pocket to withdraw a wallet. From it he took a small card which he handed to Allen without comment. It was a business card, on which was printed:

ALEXANDER M. GILLESPIE
Cowboy Outfitter
BITTERROOT, WYOMING

"There ain't much to tell, stranger, but what there is is horrible as a nightmare," Gillespie explained. "I run a tradin' post down in Bitterroot, in the Thundergust foothills. I was crossin' Glacier Pass when that blizzard struck. I come up here to the Butterfield place to hole up with the three Butterfield brothers—Lenny an' Lute, the dead hombres outside the door there, an' Lige."

"Yeah?" prompted Allen, taking his eyes off the card.

"They figgered they were snowed in for the winter, an' they were

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caught short on grub an' ammunition," Alexander Gillespie went on. "Last night, Lige got howlin' drunk. Perty soon, he takes down a .22 rifle from that rack above the fireplace, an'—an' when Lige told him to put it down. . . ."

The cowboy outfitter's voice trailed off with a shudder.

"Go on," the White Wolf ordered grimly. "What happened?"

Gillespie buried his face in his hands.

"Lige aimed his squirrel rifle at Lute an' pulled trigger. Plugged him dead between the eyes. Then Lenny—he was the youngest brother—started wrasslin' with Lige, tryin' to get the gun away from him. But when Lige is likkered up, he's stronger'n a grizzly. He finally managed to get loose, an' shot Lenny through the head. It was awful."

The White Wolf rubbed his stubbled jaw thoughtfully.

"What were you doing all that time, Gillespie?"

The trader from Bitterroot colored sheepishly.

"I lit a shuck outdoors," he confessed. "Lige was shootin' at me all the way, but he was too drunk to aim straight. Then I felt the ground go out under me, an' that's the last I knew. Seems I knocked myself out."

THE White Wolf inhaled deeply. Gillespie's story had the ring of truth about it.

Mentally back-tracking, Jim-twin Allen could reconstruct the events which had occurred after Alexander Gillespie, fleeing in horror, had tumbled through the rotten lid of the miners' garbage pit.

Lige Butterfield might have sobered up, when he saw the dead bodies of his brothers. But more likely, he swilled down more liquor. Nothing else could account for the fact that he had had the callous depravity to drag his murdered brothers outdoors and convert them into snow men.

That done, Lige Butterfield had apparently locked up the cabin and struck out down Glacier Pass alone, taking the .22 rifle with him. By now, Lige would either be frozen to death in some snowdrift or, if he survived the trip out of the Tetons, would be in panic-stricken flight to escape the consequences of his deed.

Leaving Gillespie, Allen went outdoors and made a circuit of the bunkhouse. He was not long in locating proof of the trader's story: a trail, made before the cold wind had formed a crust over the blizzard snow, the tracks of snowshoes which led in an easterly direction toward the Jackson's Hole country and civilization—the proof of Lige Butterfield's getaway.

Allen went back into the bunkhouse to find that Gillespie had stretched himself out on a bunk once more.

"I'll rustle up some grub for us," the White Wolf decided. "I'm perty nigh tuckered, myself. Come tomorrow, we can see about buryin' what's left o' the Butterfield brothers. Then we'll see about our chances of gettin' out of here before *we're* snowed in."

Gillespie rubbed his bruised skull and winced.

"I'm sure a lucky cuss," he admitted. "I'm lucky Lige was too drunk to remember I was layin' in that hole you fished me out of. And I'm lucky you come along, stranger, because I'm no mountain man. I lost my own hoss down on the pass road when the blizzard set in. Between us, we ought to get out o' this mess. I didn't ketch your name, stranger?"

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Allen and Morgan carried their grim burden on a crude stretcher that they themselves had made.

The White Wolf did not turn around from the wall cabinet where he was fishing out a can of coffee.

"Call me Shorty," he said. "Shorty Anson. I'm just a buckaroo, driftin' through the country. I got an extry horse you can use when we leave here."

CHAPTER III.

VISIT FROM THE LAW.

ALEXANDER GILLESPIE made no effort to assist Jim-twin Allen in the preparation of a meal from the meager provisions which the Butterfield larder contained, but the White Wolf was too far gone with fatigue and hunger to resent the trader's lack of co-operation. The Wyoming sun was westering down the wedge of Glacier Pass by the time they had finished eating, and Jim-twin Allen made his way to the bunk alongside the one Gillespie had chosen.

"I'm dead to the world, Gillespie," the Wolf said, as he pulled off his spurred cow boots and unbuckled his chaps. "I'll prob'ly sleep like a drunk man for twenty, thirty hours. In case you hear anything outside—like this Lige Butterfield killer maybe comin' back to the mine—wake me up. Savvy?"

Gillespie yawned.

"I sure will, Shorty." He grinned. "Me, I don't want to cross trails

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with that butcherin' skunk ag'in. I never shot a firearm in my life, an' that's gospel."

Slumping down on a straw-stuffed pillow, the White Wolf was too drowsy to question a queer angle of Gillespie's remark. If the trader was such a stranger to firearms, how come he had been packing a Colt Peacemaker—in an under-sized holster, to boot—at the time Allen had found him unconscious? Certainly there had been scant time for Gillespie to buckle on a gun belt, after the demented Lige Butterfield had started his slaughter.

But even before he could draw a buffalo robe about him, Jim-twin Allen was asleep, his iron nerve having reached its limit.

TWO hours later, Alexander Gillespie swung his legs off the bunk he occupied, and tiptoed to the door. A full moon had turned the snow-covered landscape into a fairy wonderland.

From the snow-incased corpse of Lenny Butterfield, the trader took the Winchester .30-30 which Lenny's slayer had placed beside the macabre snow man. The trader levered a shell into the breech and checked the magazine loads with the skill of long experience. Stepping back into the cabin, Gillespie located the hickory-framed, rawhide-laced snowshoes which the stranger calling himself Shorty Anson had removed from his feet.

Leaning the snowshoes on the wall, Gillespie tiptoed over to the bunk where Anson was sleeping like a drugged man. With infinite caution, Gillespie eared back the hammer of the .30-30 and aimed the muzzle an inch from the White Wolf's temple.

But before he could pull trigger to send a bullet into the brain of his sleeping benefactor, something clattered noisily on the windowpane above the bunk. Starting violently, Gillespie rushed to the open doorway and looked out over the moonlit slope.

"Sounded like somebody tossed a pebble at the window—it might be Lige comin' back!"

Then, far down the mountainside, the trader caught sight of a lone figure climbing the slope, plodding along on snowshoes.

Panic swept the Bitterroot trader as he realized that the sound he had heard had been nothing but an icicle dropping off the eaves. But that chance noise had warned him of the approach of the snowshoe-clad traveler.

Taking down a pair of field glasses which hung from a peg by the door, Gillespie focused the lenses on the plodding figure. In the clear, cold moonlight, the trader saw that the man was no trapper. There was a sheriff's star glinting on the hombre's buffalo-hide coat, and he was carrying a carbine in one mittened hand.

"Sheriff Golter o' Steerville!" gasped the trader under his breath. "Lige Butterfield got to him, then—"

For a moment, Gillespie considered drawing a bead on the oncoming sheriff. Even at a thousand yards' range, the ambush shot would be easy with the high-powered .30-30.

Then a second figure emerged from the edge of the timber—a deputy sheriff, no doubt.

The appearance of the second lawman altered things. It was an easy matter to bushwhack Link Golter. But the deputy, forewarned by the shot, would be able to drop prone in the snow. And Alexander Gillespie did not hone for a shoot-out, just now.

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The plodding lawmen passed out of sight in a snow-shrouded dip. Forgetting the very existence of the tired cowpuncher who was slumbering heavily on the cabin bunk, Gillespie buckled on his snowshoes and, picking up his rifle, hurried down the slope to the garbage hole from which the White Wolf had saved him. Gillespie forgot all else except that time was precious—

Clambering down into the hole into which he had stumbled earlier that day, Gillespie picked up a small box which he had been carrying and which the White Wolf overlooked among the litter of tin cans and empty bottles and other junk which filled the hole.

The trader's grunts of exertion indicated that the box was incredibly heavy for its size, as he tossed it out on the snow. Then, clambering out of the garbage hole, Gillespie shouldered the box and padded off across the drifts.

Five minutes later the trader vanished into the pine forest which overhung the Three Brothers Mine. And two minutes after that, Link Golter, sheriff of the nearby cow town of Steerville, emerged from the snowy hollow and came in sight of the Butterfield cabin.

BREATHING heavily, Golter waited until his deputy, a red-whiskered hombre named Ferd Porter, had come up to him.

"There ain't a chance that that killer is anywhere around the mine, Ferd," the Steerville sheriff conceded. "We'll spend the night here, anyhow, an' be ready to read sign at daylight."

Shoulder by shoulder, the snowshoe-clad lawmen approached the snow-covered bunkhouse.

"It's too bad Lige Butterfield passed out before he could give us a description o' the busky who murdered his brothers," the deputy grunted. "I had a hunch, from the way he was babblin', that he knowed who the killer was."

Golter smiled bitterly. "Yeah. But we couldn't waste time waitin' for Lige to come to, son. I got a hunch Butterfield will be dead by the time we get back to Steerville. Most likely he'll never wake up ag'in, with that bullet he was packin' in his gizzard."

Reaching the cabin door, the sheriff and his deputy drew back aghast as they saw the gruesome snow men guarding the bunkhouse. In the spectral moonlight, the faces of Lenny and Lute Butterfield were as natural as they had been in life.

"Of all the skunk tricks!" cried

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Golter, shock putting a catch in his voice. "Not only did that polecat hole up with the Butterfields to escape that blizzard, but after he murdered two of 'em an' wounded old Lige, he had the gall to set up these corpses an' build snow men around 'em!"

Ferd Porter's wind-bitten face went as white as the snow which clung to his brows and lashes.

"It's inhuman," whispered the deputy. "We're buckin' a maniac, sheriff. No less than a ravin' mad dog—"

Porter broke off, as there came to the ears of the two lawmen the unmistakable sounds of a man's snoring from inside the cabin.

Exchanging dumfounded glances, the two stooped to unbuckle their snowshoes and peel off their heavy buffalo coats. Then, leaning their bulky rifles against the snow men, Golter and his deputy slid six-guns from belt holsters and stole forward into the cabin.

The sounds of snoring continued uninterrupted as the lawmen stepped into the room. A shaft of moonlight, pouring in through the cabin's single window in the end of the room, showed them the sleeping figure stretched out on one of the Butterfield brothers' bunks.

With infinite caution, the pair inched their way up to the sleeper, noting his cactus-scuffed batwing chaps and Coffeyville boots, standing in a puddle of melted snow. The sleeper was a short, compactly built man with a face which, relaxed in sleep, could have been that of a man of twenty or forty. It was a harsh face, sharp-etched with lines of suffering and fatigue. The man was obviously dead to the world, sleeping the sleep of total exhaustion. He had tumbled onto the bunk without bothering to remove the bone-handled Peacemakers from his holsters.

Stooping over the sleeper, Link Golter carefully removed the Peacemakers from scabbards. Laying the guns on the upper bunk, the sheriff removed a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket of his Levis and then reached down to shake the man's shoulder.

The outlaw groaned, rolled over and resumed his heavy, measured breathing.

A moment later Golter's manacles clicked shut over the sleeping man's wrists. Even the cold contact of metal on his flesh did not rouse the exhausted outlaw.

"Can you beat that, sheriff?" whispered Ferd Porter incredulously. "He massacres the Butterfield boys an' then goes to sleep after buildin' them snow critters. Most likely figgered Lige wouldn't live to reach town, an' that he'd be safe here until the spring thaws—"

Golter turned to his deputy with a queer grin.

"Go out to the stable, Ferd," he ordered, "an' see if there's a couple o' gray ponies out there. I got a hunch I know who pulled this outrage. Two gray ponies would prove it."

Link Golter was seated on an upturned powder box alongside his prisoner's bunk when Porter got back from the stable.

"You're right, sheriff!" cried the deputy excitedly. "Two gray ponies, a mustang an' a mare. Branded Bar L L Bar."

The Steerville sheriff grinned harshly. "This owlhooter's packin' a four-fifty bounty on his scalp, then. Ferd, from here on out, we're famous. This killer is Jim-twin Allen, *the White Wolf!*"

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CHAPTER IV.

KILLER'S BRAND.

THE icy contact of a six-gun muzzle pressed against his neck roused Jim-twin Allen out of a dream in which the governors of the half a dozen States and Territories which had issued bounties for his capture, dead or alive, had called upon him with a bale of pardon documents.

As consciousness returned, the White Wolf's senses snapped back to their normal alertness. Instinct caused him to stab his hands toward gun butts—and in so doing, the tug of steel bracelets girdling his wrists brought Allen wide awake with a start.

He reared to a sitting position on the bunk, eyes blinking against the glare of a coal-oil lantern which a grinning hombre with a deputy sheriff's star was holding over him.

"Take 'er easy, White Wolf. I've dehorned you an' hogtied you for brandin'."

The soft drawl did not come from the lantern-toting deputy. Heart slamming his ribs, Jim-twin Allen swiveled his gaze to the left to find himself staring into the black bore of a cocked .45, held by a lantern-jawed hombre with a sheriff's star pinned to his buffalo coat.

Despair jelled the White Wolf's veins. A glance at his flanks revealed that his holsters were empty. Handcuffs had been snapped about his wrists while he slept—even though ordinarily Allen slept as lightly as a wild animal, nerves subconsciously alert whether asleep or awake.

"*'Sta bueno,*" groaned the outlaw, when the first stabbing pang of horror had spent itself. "You win, John Law. But I never thought I'd ever get a loop dabbed on me when I—when I wasn't even wearin' my boots."

The Steerville lawman grinned crookedly. "I'm Link Golter, an' this here is my deputy, Ferd Porter. You ain't denyin' you're the White Wolf?"

Allen shrugged.

"No use lyin', now you got me corralled," he admitted. "You prob'ly studied my picture often enough on a reward dodger."

Golter settled back on the powder box, resting the six-gun across his knees. His mouth hardened as he leaned closer to the gaunt-faced prisoner.

"You'll save a heap o' time," the sheriff said gravely, "if you'll confess as quick to the murder o' the Butterfield boys. Soon as we get you back to the calaboose in Steerville, Lige Butterfield will identify you as his brothers' killer, anyway. You see, Wolf, Lige wasn't so bad wounded as you must've thought. It was all me an' Ferd could do to keep Lige from comin' back here to the mine with us."

In the shock of awakening to find himself trapped by the law, the White Wolf had completely forgotten the circumstances which had brought him to the Three Brothers bunkhouse.

"Hold on!" gasped the prisoner dazedly. "I been framed for a heap o' killin's I wasn't guilty of, sheriff. But the Butterfield jaspers were stone-dead before I got here. An' I can prove it. I got an eyewitness to the whole shebang."

The White Wolf got to his feet, staring at the bunk where Gillespie should have been sleeping.

"Meanin' Lige?" jeered the deputy, Ferd Porter. "He ain't exactly in the mood to clear you o' this massacre charge, Allen."

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Allen's jaw dropped. "Where's Alexander Gillespie? He was in this bunk when I went to sleep just before sundown—"

Golter and his deputy exchanged sarcastic grins.

"Alexander Gillespie?" demanded the sheriff. "You don't mean the boss o' the tradin' post down in Bitterroot? What call would that storekeeper have to be up here in Glacier Pass?"

The truth was beginning to dawn on the White Wolf then, as he saw that Gillespie's snowshoes were missing from the spot where Allen had unbuckled them and leaned them against the log wall.

"Gillespie—wait a minute, John Law!" rasped the White Wolf. "I been double-crossed. Listen. Here's what Gillespie told me about this Butterfield shootin' scrape—"

LINK GOLTER listened to his prisoner's narrative with frank skepticism. The White Wolf held back nothing, from the time he had come to the Three Brothers Mine to get food and shelter. Speaking with passionate sincerity, the outlaw outlined his discovery of the gruesome secret which the two snow men held, his rescue of the Bitterroot trader from the garbage pit, and how he had accepted Gillespie's version of the Butterfield tragedy for its face value.

"Can't you see, Golter?" Allen wound up, his face drenched with perspiration in spite of the frigid temperature of the cabin. "Gillespie himself must 'a' murdered them miners an' let one o' the three brothers make his getaway. When that garbage dump caved in an' knocked him out, Gillespie had to think fast—so he made up that story I just told you."

Link Golter yawned with frank boredom. Turning to Ferd Porter, the sheriff said brusquely:

"We'll take Lenny an' Lute out o' them snow-men casin's an' rig up some sort of a sled, Ferd. I reckon them corpses'll keep until we take 'em to Steerville for a decent burial. Supposin' you get busy on that. Maybe you'll find an old dog sled or somethin' out in the stable where the White Wolf bedded down his grays."

When the deputy had gone out into the night, the sheriff turned back to see the White Wolf staring transfixedly at the floor by the overturned table.

"That was a righty salty story you give me, Allen," said the lawman. "I reckon Alex Gillespie will get a good laugh out of it when he hears about it. That is, unless you can prove—"

Jim-twin Allen lunged to his feet and passed Golter, who lifted his six-gun warily.

"You're danged tootin' I can prove Gillespie was up here!" cried the White Wolf, stopping to snatch up a small rectangle of cardboard from the floor where he had been staring. "Take a gander at this sheriff!"

Scowling, his nerves taut against the possibility of a false move on Allen's part, Link Golter accepted the small card. His jaw gasped open as he read the printed lines:

ALEXANDER M. GILLESPIE
Cowboy Outfitter
BITTERROOT, WYOMING

"Gillespie's business card!" rasped the White Wolf. "He give it to me after he come to. An' somethin' else I got for proof that Gillespie was here when I went to sleep, Golter. We ought to be able to find snowshoe tracks where that skunk made his gitaway after I'd drowsed

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off. Another set o' tracks besides the ones that Lige Butterfield left!"

The first hint of doubt appeared in the sheriff's faded eyes as he let Gillespie's business card flutter to the puncheons underfoot.

"Walk outdoors, buskie!" clipped the sheriff, picking up the deputy's lantern. "I ain't so bull-headed I won't give you a chance to prove your yarn. Knowin' you're headed for hang rope on your own rep, there's no real cause for you to try an' pin this double murder on an innocent party."

THE handcuffed outlaw walked out into the moonlight, shuddering as the icy wind hit his ribs. Link Golter was at his heels, gun poised at the White Wolf's back as Allen walked out into the snow. Beside the door, Deputy Sheriff Ferd Porter was stretching Lenny Butterfield's corpse out on a snowdrift, having released the board-stiff body from the confining snow man.

"There goes fresh tracks—made since the snow crusted over, sheriff!" the White Wolf called back. "They're headin' down the hill. See—there go my tracks, where I brought Gillespie back from that garbage dump."

The two lawmen followed Jim-twin Allen as their prisoner headed down the mountainside below the gold mine, tracing the fresh set of webbed tracks over to the brink of the caved-in garbage pit.

Pointing with fettered arms, Allen indicated a peculiar imprint in the snow beside the garbage hole—a depression with sharp-cut square corners, as if a heavy box had been set there. It was a mark which Allen was positive had not been there at the time he had discovered Alexander Gillespie's unconscious body down in the hole.

"I think I savvy what happened after I went to sleep, Golter!" exclaimed the White Wolf. "If Gillespie killed them Butterfield jiggers—why did he do it? My hunch is that he spotted a box o' gold dust that them miners took out o' their shaft durin' the summer. He was carryin' that box o' loot when the garbage pit caved in an' knocked him out. I overlooked the box when I pulled him out."

Golter thrust his six-gun back into holster.

"By gosh, it makes sense!" the lawman conceded grudgingly. "When Gillespie seen you were asleep, he put on his webs an' come down here to fish out a box o' some kind—and that hollow there is where he planted the box in the snow."

Of one accord, the eyes of the three men picked up the set of snowshoe tracks which led off from the spot where the mysterious box had lain in the snow.

The imprint of the webs were deeper than usual, proof that their wearer had been carrying a heavy weight. The trail slanted off toward the southeast, and in the clear moonlight the trio could see where the walker had vanished into the snow-hung pine forest above the mine.

"Maybe I'm an old fool, Ferd," the sheriff told his deputy, "but I think the White Wolf is tellin' us the truth. We come up here to nab the killer Lige Butterfield told us about. After all, it don't make sense that the White Wolf would commit these killin's an' then go off to sleep thataway."

They made their way back to the cabin, where Lute Butterfield's corpse still stood incased in its grisly snow shell. Staring down at Lenny Butterfield's remains, the White Wolf noticed a detail which appar-

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ently had escaped the deputy's attention while he was extricating the dead man from the snow coffin.

"Take a look at that six-gun Butterfield's packin' in his holster, sheriff!" urged the White Wolf. "It's a light-caliber gun 'way too small for that big holster!"

Link Golter squatted down to remove the cedar-butted revolver from the basket-woven holster thonged to Lenny Butterfield's thigh. Jacking it open, the sheriff saw that the chambers were filled with exploded cartridges—of .22 caliber.

"A target gun!" exclaimed Jim-twin Allen. "You notice the bullet holes in the heads of these two miners, sheriff? They weren't made with a .45 or even a .30-30. My hunch is that this Gillespie hombre was carryin' that .22 when he visited this cabin—and that that's the gun that killed them two miners!"

The White Wolf was recalling vividly, in that moment, that Alexander Gillespie's .45 had been squeezed into a holster which had obviously been tailored for a much smaller weapon.

He told the sheriff as much, adding: "Gillespie knew he'd need a heavier gun if he encountered a bear or a pack o' wolves while he was trampin' out o' the mountains with that box o' *oro*. So he stuck his own .22 hogleg into Butterfield's holster, an' shoved Butterfield's Peacemaker into his own leather."

Golter stood up, tossing the .22 revolver into the cabin.

"We're hittin' Gillespie's trail, Ferd!" snapped the sheriff. "An' we're takin' the White Wolf with us, just to save ourselves a trip back to this mine. Take the lantern an' roust up a set o' webs for the Wolf to wear. Gillespie can't have much of a head start on us."

CHAPTER V.

AMBUSH BULLETS.

THEY delayed at the Three Brothers Mine only long enough to grant the White Wolf's request that extra hay be pitched down from the stable loft to feed Princess and Gray Comet for a long stretch. That done, the two lawmen and their handcuffed prisoner set out up the mountainside on Gillespie's trail, Jim-twin Allen shuffling along in a pair of miner's boots fitted to snowshoes which Porter had located inside the bunkhouse. There was no difficulty in tracing the Bitterroot trader, for his long, tapering webs had sunk deeply into the snow.

Less than a hundred yards inside the forest, they found a rectangular imprint in a drift atop a fallen log, where the fleeing killer had rested his box, presumably filled with murder loot.

A blazing sunrise was in their eyes several hours later when they topped the south shoulder of Glacier Pass and looked out over a wide expanse of silent white mountain country, glowing like silver in the rays of the Wyoming sun.

Somewhere in the snow-wigged expanse before them, Alexander Gillespie was plodding ahead of them, toting his box of loot. But from their lofty elevation, they saw no trace of their quarry.

Nearly snow-blinded, the White Wolf managed to spot a column of blue smoke rising out of the white-blanketed forest, two miles ahead, where a hazy gulf in the trees indicated a clearing.

"We ain't got far to go, gents!" Allen cried excitedly. "Gillespie's lit a campfire to thaw himself out, figgerin' he'd be safe on this side o' the ridge. I'll bet my last blue chip you can dab your twine on that

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double-crossin' trader right at the bottom o' that smoke!"

The two lawmen levered cartridges into the breeches of their Winchesters and hurried down the slope, flanking the White Wolf. Gillespie's tracks led in the general direction of the smoke Allen had spotted, until they reached the foot of the ridge. There, the snowshoe marks veered off toward the south in the direction of the Thundergust range. Bitterroot town lay in that direction, and it seemed that Gillespie was making straight for his home stamping grounds.

"We can save time by makin' a beeline toward that clearin', sheriff!" Allen urged the tin star, as they paused to regard the abrupt change in the angle of Gillespie's trail. "He meandered around through the trees an' wound up at that clearin'—"

Disappointment was written on Ferd Porter's frost-bitten countenance as he shook his head.

"We guessed wrong about that smoke, boys," groaned the sheriff. "Ifn I hadn't been so bone-tired an' played out, I'd recognized that smoke as comin' out o' Bighorn Meadow."

Allen saw the deputy's face fall as he nodded agreement.

"Meanin' what?" demanded the handcuffed outlaw anxiously.

Golter smiled bitterly. "A trapper name of Stag Morgan has his cabin over in that clearin', Allen. That smoke we seen come from his chimney. The reason Gillespie veered off toward the south is because he wanted to dodge Morgan's place, most likely."

Ferd Porter grounded the butt of his Winchester and leaned on the rifle wearily.

"I vote we go over to Stag's place an' get some java an' hot flapjacks in our bellies, Link," suggested the deputy. "If Gillespie's steerin' for Bitterroot, we can overtake him before noon anyhow."

WISE to the ways of fugitive owl-hooters from long and grueling experience of his own, the White Wolf opened his mouth to protest against any delay in pursuing Alexander Gillespie, when the early morning silence was blasted by the roar of a gunshot off ahead through the trees.

With a choked gasp, Deputy Sheriff Porter reeled backward and let his rifle fall in the snow. As the White Wolf and Sheriff Golter stared they saw Porter collapse in the snow, blood gushing from a bullet hole which drilled his skull.

"Ambush!" yelled Golter, as the two men flung themselves flat on the snow beside Porter's corpse. "Gillespie holed up an' bushwhacked the best deputy a man—"

Whinnnnng! A second bullet whined overhead, cutting Golter off. On the heels of the second gunshot came a third, kicking snow in the White Wolf's face.

Of one accord, the two men scuttled on hands and knees for the shelter of a nearby boulder nest.

Snarling oaths, the sheriff pawed in a pocket of his Levis and brought out the key to the White Wolf's manacles.

A grin spread on Allen's lips as he saw the lawman reach over and unlock his left-hand fetter.

"Thanks, sheriff!" said the outlaw, as his arms came free. "I'll belly over there an' get the deputy's carbine, an'—"

Golter shook his head grimly. "You're a killer wolf, Jim-twin Allen, an' I'm takin' no chances o' lettin' you shoot me in the back! Belly

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Continued from page 148

up to that tree yonder an' hug yore arms around it. I'm shacklin' you up while I smoke that ambusher out o' his nest."

Under the menace of Golter's .30-30, coupled with the fact that their unseen attacker was probably skulking up through the trees at that moment, the White Wolf could do nothing but comply. When Allen's arms were circling the bole of a small pine tree, Golter crawled forward and snapped the handcuff over Allen's left wrist once more.

"Now you'll stay put," grated the lawman. "I'll be back in a couple of ticks with a dry-gulchin' son, or know the reason why."

Allen groaned as he saw the sheriff rise to a crouch and head off into the trees, eyes probing the white wilderness which held the secret of their invisible foe.

Brrrang! From a snow-shrouded clump of underbrush not twenty feet away came a fount of gun smoke, and the White Wolf saw the sheriff spin about under the impact of a steel-jacketed slug which caught him in the chest. Golter went down, the rifle dropping from his fingers.

Staring in horror from the tree to which he was shackled, the White Wolf saw another spear of flame shoot from the thicket which concealed the gunman, and saw Golter slump dead on the snow as the second bullet caught him squarely in the head.

FOR a long minute, nothing moved in the ghastly hush. Then the thicket parted, and Alexander Gillespie came into view, teeth bared in a sneering grin. Tramping up alongside the sheriff, Gillespie prodded the murdered lawman with the tip of a snowshoe. Then, ignoring the White Wolf, the Bitterroot trader crunched his way over to inspect Ferd Porter's body.

Not until then did the ambusher make his way over to the pine tree where Jim-twin Allen was standing, his arms fettered helplessly about the moss-covered trunk. Allen saw raw hate simmering in Gillespie's pale eyes, along with a maniacal expression of triumph.

"So Golter jumped to the conclusion that *you* murdered the Butterfields, eh?" snarled the outlaw, settling to one knee and fishing in a pocket of his Mackinaw for tobacco and thin husks. "Well, I had an idee you'd talk 'em into follerin' my trail. That's why I bushed up to wait an' see. If I hadn't been in such an all-fired hurry, I'd settled your hash back at the mine before I left last night."

The White Wolf knew that his own murder could be but moments away, perhaps when Gillespie had finished rolling and licking his cigarette. The trader seemed to be enjoying the situation, building his smoke with infinite care.

"You did kill them miners, eh?" grunted the White Wolf in a flat voice. "An' you were packin' away a box o' gold dust, maybe?"

Gillespie reached over to take a match from Allen's hatband and fired his quirly.

"Yeah," he admitted callously, "the blizzard drove me up to the Three Brothers Mine. The Butterfield boys were short o' grub and were fixin' to pull out for the winter. When they thought I was asleep they dug a box o' gold dust out from under the floor." A maniac's laugh punctuated the slayer's recital of his deed. "I was packin' a .22 smokepole. I dropped Lenny an' Lute, but only wounded Lige. He fought like a bull, smashin' furniture at me. Finally, he grabbed his snowshoes an'

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vamoosed, shot up like a sponge. I never figgered he'd live to reach Steerville—"

Jim-twin Allen felt nausea stab through him.

"And the snow men?" he bit out. "Was that your idea o' humor, or—"

Gillespie laughed. "It was easier than buryin' 'em, so I made Lute an' Lenny into snow men—an' dolled 'em up with their hats an' all that, just because it tickled my sense o' humor, yeah. I didn't want to leave 'em in the cabin, just in case somebody came along an' discovered 'em before I'd made my getaway. Them snow men woulda kept until spring came—"

Gillespie broke off with a gasp of horror as a snarling sound issued from a thicket a dozen yards away. Twisting about to follow the line of Gillespie's stare, the White Wolf saw three gaunt timber lobos emerging from the aspens.

The scent of freshly spilled blood had drawn the wolf pack from their winter lair. Their fangs were already slavering in anticipation of a feast.

"Wolves!" cried the trader. "They're hungry enough to kill a—" Gillespie's voice trailed off, and he lowered the Winchester he had been in the act of aiming. Allen guessed the trader's idea before Gillespie spoke. He read his own doom in the trader's eyes.

"I'm gettin' out o' here, Anson!" snarled the bushwhacker, springing to his feet. "Lige has already spread the yarn about me shootin' Lenny an' Lute, so I got to head for Mexico. But if I leave you handcuffed to this tree, you'll hold that wolf pack while I make my getaway."

Snarls came from the waiting timber wolves, and Gillespie hurried off past the sheriff's corpse. Jim-twin Allen stifled an urge to plead for a merciful bullet in the head. Even that would be preferable to being left to the fury of the lethal-fanged lobos who would soon be quarreling over their feast.

But Alexander Gillespie was already gone, burrowing into the icicle-hung thicket from whence he had shot Golter and the deputy.

CHAPTER VI.

SMOKE SIGNAL.

DRENCHED with cold sweat, the White Wolf got a brief glimpse of the outlaw weaving off through the trees, his box of loot hugged against his chest. Then Gillespie vanished, and the trapped waddy twisted about to see the three timber wolves closing in, nostrils twitching, fangs bared.

Horror curdled Allen's veins. To remain at the foot of the pine tree would be to invite horrible death by rending fangs and claws. And out of his panic was born an idea.

With desperate strength, the White Wolf kicked his booted feet clear of the snowshoe straps and then, hitching his handcuffed arms higher up the rough-barked trunk, began climbing the tree. Peering straight overhead, Jim-twin Allen saw that the nearest limb was a good forty feet above the ground. But his only hope of escaping a grisly death from the trio of timber wolves lay in shinnying the small pine and hooking a leg over the lowest branch.

The lobos were ripping clothing from the dead lawmen by the time Jim-twin Allen had climbed out of reach of the beasts. The prospect of being treed by a wolf pack was a grim one, for starvation would eventually cause him to drop to the ground once more. But Allen found relief in the sheer grueling labor of scaling the pine. Foot by foot, yard by yard, he hitched his way up

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the mossy trunk until finally, gasping for breath and with his muscles and sinews crying out for rest, he gained the outjutting limb.

Further climbing was impossible, but the diameter of the tree had diminished to such an extent that Jim-twin Allen could grip the sturdy limb with his fettered hands. By digging toe holds in the rough bark, he was able to rest. Snow and icicles clattered off the limb, to expose the long green pine needles. Hanging there, the White Wolf peered out over the tops of lower trees, wondering if he could catch sight of Alex Gillespie somewhere in the distance.

As his eyes ranged over the bleak white landscape, Allen spotted the column of smoke rising from the chimney of Stag Morgan's cabin less than half a mile to the northeast. Sight of that lazily lifting spiral of blue smoke put an idea into the White Wolf's keen brain. He had no hope of shouting loud enough to attract the trapper's attention. But there might be another way—

HUGGING the tree trunk rigidly with his clamped legs, Allen thrust his head forward until he could grip the brim of his Stetson with the fingers of one straining hand. By dint of much effort, Allen jerked off his hat and got the brim in his teeth.

It took fifteen minutes—a veritable eternity of time to the perspiring waddy—to jockey the sombrero around so that his fingers could get at the dry matches which he had stuck in the hatband back at the Three Brothers bunkhouse the day before. He thanked his lucky stars that Alexander Gillespie had not robbed him of his match supply when the killer had taken one of the matches to light his cigarette.

Making a little bundle of six matches, the White Wolf released his teeth from the Stetson and let it flutter to the ground forty feet below. He shuddered as he saw that the three lobos had already began mutilating the corpses of Porter and the sheriff. Handicapped as he was by Golter's manacles, Allen had a hard time clinging to the little bundle of matches and working them into position so that he could ignite one of them with a thumbnail.

Finally he was rewarded by a burst of flame, and then he was pushing the matches around so that the fire could play on a clump of resinous pine needles. Blisters rose on his fingers before the conifer needles broke into flame. Highly inflammable, free of the snow which had been shaken loose from them, the needles blazed like a miniature torch—and the leaping flames ignited the bough immediately above.

In the still morning air, the fire began climbing up through the turpentine-sapped needles. Hot air weltered down on Jim-twin Allen's face, as the entire crown of the pine became enveloped in flames. Dark smoke spiraled up into the cloudless sky and mushroomed off, drifting slowly in the breeze.

For ten minutes, the flame climbed to the topmost limb, sending a dense smudge into the sky. Then the fire died out as it consumed the last inflammable bunch of pine needles, leaving only charred twigs and a few smoldering pine cones.

"Nothin' to do now but wait," Allen thought, shifting his weight. "It's a long chance that Stag Morgan will spot my signal, but he might."

The half-hour which followed was a veritable eternity to the outlaw who was perched forty feet above the ground like a high-climbing lumberjack. He tried to seal his ears

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against the snarls of the timber wolves who were quarreling over their grisly feast, far below.

Then the morning hush was convulsed by the ear-splitting whip crack of a gunshot somewhere off to the north.

LOOKING down the tree trunk, Jim-twin Allen saw one of the slavering timber wolves plop over on its back, skull drilled by a bullet.

Another gunshot sent echoes crashing off through the timber, and a second wolf loped off into the brush, leaving a crimson trail on the snow. The remaining wolf gave vent to a soul-curdling howl and beat a retreat into the aspen thicket.

The White Wolf started hunching his way back down the pine trunk, then. He was still twenty feet from the ground when he caught sight of a Mackinaw-cad hombre gliding up to the mutilated corpses on a pair of long skis, an alpenstock in either hand, a rifle slung over his back.

"What in thunder—"

The hunter peered straight overhead as he caught sight of Jim-twin Allen working his way toward the ground. The White Wolf saw astonishment written in the man's upturned face.

"You'll be Stag Morgan?" asked the weary owlhooter, hugging the pine trunk while he rested his legs.

"That's me," Morgan acknowledged, his voice still shaky with bewilderment. "These lobos treed you after they killed yore pards, eh, stranger?"

The White Wolf did not speak again until he had slipped the re-

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maining distance to the ground.

"A bushwhacker killed those buckos, Morgan," Allen said grimly. "Maybe you know 'em. Ferd Porter an' the sheriff from Steerville—Link Golter."

Shocked incredulity turned the trapper's wind-reddened face to chalky whiteness as he stared down at the fang-torn corpses. Then, turning to see why Allen did not walk away from the tree he was hugging, Stag Morgan spotted the handcuffs which girdled Allen's wrists.

"I get it," rumbled the trapper, his eyes narrowing hostilely. "You're wearin' Golter's wrist irons. You were the sheriff's prisoner, eh? You shinnied up that tree to git away from the lobos—"

Allen nodded bleakly. Then, drawing a deep breath, he poured out the story of Alexander Gillespie's cold-blooded slaughter at the Three Brothers Mine.

"The sheriff figgered maybe *I* had killed them miners—that's why he handcuffed me," the White Wolf concluded, omitting to mention Golter's real reasons for shackling him to the tree. "Would you do me the favor o' gettin' the key to these irons out o' Golter's pocket—an' turnin' me loose?"

Shuddering visibly, Stag Morgan pawed through the sheriff's pockets until he found Golter's key ring.

A moment later he had unlocked the White Wolf's left handcuff. Then, as Allen held out his other arm for Morgan to remove the remaining fetter, the whiskery-faced trapper snapped the steel bracelet back on Allen's left wrist.

"I ain't believin' your story until I check with the law, stranger!" growled the trapper. "Lincoln Golter was the best friend I had in Wyomin'. An' the Butterfield boys over the ridge yonder were my only neighbors. I got to be sure you ain't an owlhooter Golter was bringin' in

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out o' the Tetons, before I take off them irons."

Jim-twin Allen saw unshakable resolution in Morgan's eyes.

"This is a danged queer set-up," Morgan went on. "I was out choppin' some stove wood over at my place in Bighorn Meadow, when I seen smoke comin' out of the forest. I figgered a fire had started, an' then I remembered I'd heard some shootin' awhile before. So I come out to investigate—an' I find wolves chawin' my best friend an' his deputy. An' you, handcuffed to this tree. Golter musta known what he was doin', chainin' you up so you couldn't git away."

Allen groaned. "I'll show you where this Alex Gillespie jasper made his getaway, Morgan," he offered desperately. "You got to believe me. Gillespie's hittin' for parts unknown. If we don't track him down, the sheriff's bushwhacker will never be captured. An' the Butterfield massacre will never be avenged."

Stag Morgan fingered his whiskers thoughtfully, still wrestling with the strange problem which confronted him.

"Now that Golter's dead, the nearest law will be over at Pinecone town. I reckon I'll take you there, stranger, an' turn you over to the sheriff. Then I'll mosey over to Bitterroot an' locate this Gillespie."

CHAPTER VII.

WINTER REFUGE.

THE White Wolf changed expression, and a grin twitched at the corners of his lips.

"You know the sheriff o' Pinecone, Morgan?" he asked. "Jack Allen, his name is."

The trapper nodded, brows arching with surprise. "I know Jack Allen like my own brother. How come you know him? If Jack Allen identifies you as bein' O. K., then that's good enough for me."

The White Wolf thought fast. Out of the shadowy recesses of his memory, he was recalling the name of Stag Morgan. He was remembering that Jack-twin Allen had mentioned going on elk hunts and fishing trips with an hombre named Morgan. This grizzled trapper might well be the same man.

"I'm tellin' you something Morgan," Jim-twin Allen said suddenly, with the air of a man about to get a great burden off his conscience. "I not only know Jack Allen. I—I'm his brother. His twin brother Jim."

Stag Morgan's jaw sagged open. For a long minute, the two men locked stares. Then, with an impulsive gesture, Stag Morgan reached out and, to the White Wolf's amazement, unlocked the handcuffs and tossed them to one side!

"You're white White Wolf," Morgan said. "I've heard Jack speak of you a thousand times. You're packin' a reward that would sink a boat. I could collect that reward, dead or alive—if I wasn't dead certain you ain't the killer wolf some folks think you be."

It was not until they reached the shelter of Stag Morgan's cabin, carrying with them the corpses of the two Steerville lawmen on a crude stretcher made of the lawmen's coats and the two ski poles that the trapper elaborated on his sudden reversal of attitude.

"More'n once your brother's told me the legend o' the White Wolf," the trapper said, pouring a steaming cup of coffee for his exhausted companion. "The Injuns say that the White Wolf ain't a killer. The White Wolf helps the poor an' oppressed, an' don't kill except in self-defense.

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Your brother Jack has told me why you're on the dodge, Jim-twin: because you was framed long ago for a crime you didn't commit."

They left Morgan's cabin in Big-horn Meadows an hour later, with Jim-twin Allen still wearing snow-shoes because his life in the border country had not included a course on how to master skis.

"I aim to be in on this showdown with that Gillespie jigger," Stag Morgan insisted, when he had provided the White Wolf with a pair of Colt .45s. "We got to work fast, if we get to Bitterroot before Gillespie lights a shuck out o' Wyomin'. An' I know the short-cut trails to Gillespie's stampin' ground."

Instinct told the White Wolf that Morgan was sincere. He welcomed the trapper's assistance in crossing the Thundergust foothills toward Bitterroot town, and he accepted Morgan's company with implicit faith that the trapper was not going along to keep track of him.

NIGHT had fallen by the time they reached Bitterroot's main street. At the edge of town they discarded their skis and snowshoes, and Morgan led the brother of his sheriff friend down the deserted street of the cow town, past the brightly lighted windows of saloons and gambling halls, and up to a false-fronted frame shack where the White Wolf read a faded sign by the moonlight:

BITTERROOT MERCANTILE STORE
Alexander M. Gillespie
COWBOY OUTFITTER

Lamplight glowed through the store windows as the two men looked briefly to their six-guns and then shouldered through the door. A group of men were playing poker by the warmth of an iron stove in one corner, and a bony-faced clerk was filling a customer's order at a long counter.

"We're lookin' for Alex," the White Wolf said, as the clerk looked up. "He ain't out o' town, is he?"

The clerk shook his head, and Allen felt relief course through him.

"No—the boss just got in from a trip acrost the mountains," the clerk said, jerking a thumb toward a door marked *Private*. "He's in the back room thawin' out an' puttin' some grub in his belly. Lost his hoss in the blizzard that hit Glacier Pass."

Stag Morgan stalked at Jim-twin Allen's heels as the little outlaw headed for the door of Gillespie's living quarters.

Without the formality of a knock, the White Wolf opened the door with his left hand while his right slid one of his borrowed six-guns out of holster.

Morgan remained out in the store proper as the White Wolf eased the door shut behind him. Across the room, the hard-faced little outlaw was staring at Alexander Gillespie.

The slayer was in his sock feet, busy wolfing down food at a table directly beneath a ceiling lamp. Gillespie choked on a chunk of bread as he looked up to see the rawboned apparition which stalked across the room behind a jutting Colt muzzle. "Shorty Anson!" gasped the trader, rearing to his feet with a suddenness that sent his chair crashing to the floor. "You—"

The White Wolf grinned bleakly. "Get your flippers up, Gillespie! We're takin' a little *pasear* over to the jailhouse in Pinecone. An' I'll be obliged if you tote along that box o' gold you lugged over from the Three Brothers Mine."

A sideward darting of Gillespie's eyes led the White Wolf's gaze to the box of gold dust, resting on a bunk, half-covered by the Mackinaw coat

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which the trader had shed.

Then, without warning, Alexander Gillespie defied Allen's gun drop, and his hand shot down to the small-sized holster where a .45 six-gun had been thrust. With a draw that was incredibly fast, the Bitterroot trader whipped Butterfield's gun to a level and eared back the hammer.

The two men fired as one, across a space of six feet. But Gillespie's hasty shot from the hip went wide, the slug hammering into the wall behind Jim-twin Allen. The .45 roared and bucked in the White Wolf's hand, and the outlaw saw blood spurt from a bullet hole drilled under Alex Gillespie's left eye.

Dead on his feet, Gillespie stood there for a dozen seconds before slumping inertly to the floor. Four murders had been avenged by the White Wolf's single unerring shot.

From the store outside came Stag Morgan's throaty bellow:

"Stand where you are, buscaderos! My friend was conductin' some overdue business with Alex Gillespie!"

Thrusting his smoke-spewing Colt into holster, Jim-twin Allen walked over to pick up the gold-laden box which the trader had carried out of the frozen Teton wastes that day.

Backing out into the store, the White Wolf saw Stag Morgan holding the poker players and the ashen-faced clerk at bay with his .45s.

"Stand hitched!" thundered the trapper. "Don't try to foller us!"

Side by side, the two men backed out into the frigid night.

TWO weeks later, Sheriff Jack-twin Allen of Pinecone had a visitor. The wiry lawman's face lighted with pleasure as Stag Morgan came into

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his office in the Pinecone jail building and tugged off his mittens.

"Just come over from Steerville, pard." The trapper grinned. "I delivered a box o' gold dust to Lige Butterfield, one o' the owners o' the Three Brothers Mine up in Glacier Pass. Seems Lige is pullin' out O. K. after gettin' bad shot up awhile back."

Over a handshake, Jack Allen grinned. "I'm supposed to arrest a friend of yours for the murder of Alexander Gillespie, over in Bitterroot. I knew you'd come over in good time an' explain the set-up—an' tell me who your gun-shootin' friend was. An' where he's holin' up."

Morgan's eyes twinkled as he sat down on the sheriff's desk and lit his pipe.

"I was gittin' around to that, friend." He chuckled. "I didn't bring that gunnie with me—he went back up to the Three Brothers Mine where he'd left his two gray hosses. Last week I took my sled dogs up there with a winter's supply o' grub for this friend. He'll be holed up there until the spring thaws."

"Two gray hosses?" Jack Allen exclaimed. "You don't mean—"

Stag Morgan threw back his head and laughed. "You guessed right, Jack. The hombre who killed Alex Gillespie was your twin, the White Wolf. After you hear my story o' that killin', you can decide for yourself if you want to sashay up to Glacier Pass an' arrest him. But personally, I hope you save yourself a hard trip. Jim-twin's snowed in for the winter—an' for the next four months, he's secure from you or any other star-totin' Johnny Law."

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READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West Weekly, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.

Howdy, all you reader pards! Street & Smith's Wild West is published every other week now, beginning with this issue. We are doing this to save transportation space and paper for the war effort.

All the letters in this particular department refer back to stories published while the magazine was Wild West *Weekly*, nicknamed 3W. Until the end of the war it'll be Street & Smith's Wild West, nickname to be 2W if you wish.

NOVEMBER'S BEST

DEAR RANGE BOSSS: Here are my ratings of the top stories in November issues of your magazine:

1. "Gun-smoke Law," King Kolt returns in a smashing novel such as only Paul S. Powers can produce.
2. "Kidnaped Pardon." Author Lee Bond's Oklahoma Kid would have no part of a gun-smoke pardon.
3. "Pistol Poison," by James P. Webb. Once again Rowdy Lang dons his six-guns and rides the dim trails—look out, owlhooters and claim jumpers! (A more suitable title for this story would have been "Avalanche of Doom," eh?)
4. "Buzzard Bullets for Thanksgiving," by Cleve Endicott. The Circle J pards swap their broncs for a blazing freight train.
5. "Hoodoo Hacienda," by Walker Tompkins. Border Patrolman Tommy Rockford uncovers some spooky business.
6. "Forty-five Fiesta," by Guy L. Maynard. Señor Red Mask pits his guns against Yaqui outlaws.

Other great stories were "Powder on the Sage," by Lee Bond; "Powder-smoke Preacher," by Clint McCleod; "Timber-line Trap," by William F. Bragg.

Waal, Boss, November was a month of great stories indeed, so keep up the good work and keep 'em stories rolling!

THE WHITE BAT.

Chattanooga, Tenn.

Much obliged, Bat. Come again with more listings.

GEORGIA GULLY JUMPER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is an old pard of yours from way down in Georgia—a pard who writes to tell you that the Wild West Weekly spread has improved a lot.

My favorite characters are Blacky Solone, Tommy Rockford, Risky McGee, Oklahoma Kid, Circle J pards, Whistlin' Kid, Border Eagle and Señor Red Mask.

(I *do* jump gullies. Do you?)

Your old pard,

THE GEORGIA GULLY JUMPER.

West Point, Ga.

Yep, I've jumped a few, amigo—both on hossback and off.

SAYS PARD SLIM

AMIGO BOSS: I read your magazine every week and I think it's great. I work with Rusty and he's sure got a swell opinion about your magazine.

I remain,

SLIM JOHNSON.

Paloma, Cal.

I printed yore pard Rusty's note in a recent issue, Slim. Didn't have room for yours then.

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FROM AIRMAN OLIVER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Well, here I am back again to give a few suggestions. I have not written in a long time, but I have been reading 3W regularly. I had been working in a defense plant, but now I have joined the air corps and in the lull between jobs I have found time to write.

I sure enjoyed the Circle J story in the Thanksgiving issue entitled "Buzzard Bullets for Thanksgiving." Cleve Endicott is still doing a mighty fine job with the Circle J pards.

Author Emery Jackson sure put out a good story about the Whistlin' Kid. Let's have more. Also, how about bringing the Silver Kid back? Then let's have more of Johnny Forty-five, Hungry and Rusty and Kid Wolf.

Well, Boss, I guess that'll be all for this time. Keep 'em flying!

Yours truly,
JAMES RUSSELL OLIVER.

Best luck to you, pardner, in yore new activity. It's up to our readers and us decrepit old author and editor galoots to buy the War Stamps and War Bonds to keep you gents flyin'. I reckon by this time you're actively at the new job, elsewhere.

THE CLUBMAN SPEAKS

DEAR BOSS: I was very pleased to see in the Irons that letter by Billy Ruble, who seems to know what he's talking about. He came so near to some of my views that I decided to uncover this here now tripewriter and write you a note agreeing with this hombre—in most cases.

I heartily agree that there should be a 3W Annual, but I don't think it should be put up to the readers to choose the stories and characters to appear in it. I'm thinking that this would cause friction, and I *do* mean friction. Everyone would want his or her favorite character in this annual, and when the annual came out and the reader's favorite character didn't appear, he'd feel pretty sore. Now if it was left up to the editor to choose the characters, the readers would have to be fairly well satisfied because it hadn't been left up to them to do the choosing, and so they couldn't necessarily feel that they'd been beat by the other readers. But I do think that 3W should have an annual. And I'll just suggest that T. W. Ford's Silver Kid ought to be in it.

I don't think that *¿Quien Sabe?* should be dropped, but it could be improved on a lot. As Billy said, it does almost take a cowboy, a professor and a naturalist to solve some of those questions, and I doubt if there is that combination living. Why don't you stick a little more to the cowboy in general—his work, garb, and the cowboy north and south. That department gets off the beaten trail pretty bad at times.

Your illustrations aren't very good any more. When Bjorklund or Ed Delavy illustrated 3W, you had something. Ed (friend of mine) is in the army now, and so couldn't handle the illustrating of a magazine, but Bjorklund is still in the business, I trust. I was crazy over those full-page story heads that you had in and around '38 and '39.

The two things I miss the most in 3W are the Wranglers Corner and the old heading used on the contents page. That picture with Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, Founded 1902 in black letters up in the clouds and silhouette cowboy gun-fighting on horseback was part of 3W. Taking it away, and putting on that simple heading that you have now, is like cutting off a fellow's leg and giving him a peg leg to replace it. And the same feeling goes with the Wranglers Corner. With both legs cut off, a fellow finds it pretty hard to get around.

I think you had the makings of a fine regular character in Mark Lish's Wildcat Bob Maguire, but he appeared in only two stories. Mark is a fine author, and his work is natural and real cowboy from the first to the last page. He tells me that he isn't a fast producer, but you could nag him into doing a few Maguire yarns. Besides being a swell author, Mark is a swell fellow. He's a good friend of mine, and he's told me many interesting things about his life as a cowboy.

T. W. Ford's Silver Kid was one of the best regular characters you've ever had. It would be swell to read about him again.

To end, I think you should return with such characters as Silver Kid, Calamity Boggs, Billy the Kid, Freckles Malone and the picture stories. Get Shoshone Gwinn to write another yarn on the order of "Hombre from Hades," and if Bill Bragg can get away from his government job for a spell, lets have more Silver Jack Steele yarns like the one he did a few weeks ago.

Buena fortuna,
(Member No. 4, 3W Club)
BILL JAMES.
Madison, Wis.

We haven't decided about an annual, Bill. As for *¿Quien Sabe?*—we try to use a variety of questions without repeating too much on one subject. It isn't intended to be a quiz program so much as an information department. Nobody but a man who spent quite a bit of time on research could be expected to know all the answers. But most readers like it because it gives them interesting information. As for the art, most of our readers seem to think it has improved lately. But yo're entitled to yore opinion.

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NOTES

SINGS A SOLO FOR STRANT

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Ever since I can remember the Silver Kid (Solo Strant) has been appearing in your pages; that is, until about a year ago. Strant, needless to say, is my favorite character, and I want to know, definitely, if he is going to return or not.

For about three months now you have been saying he *may* return and *probably will* return, later on. But he *hasn't* returned. Please see that he *does* return, or else tell us reading gals and gents that he won't and get it over with. It will save you a lot of pestering.

Sincerely,

CHERRY WILSON.

Nanty-Glo, Pa.

Up to the moment of writing, we haven't been able to get in touch with T. W. Ford, author of the Silver Kid stories. That's why we haven't been able to say definitely whether or not the Kid will return to our pages. Possibly he will; maybe he won't. That's all we know about it, Cherry. By the way, are you related to the Cherry Wilson who writes for our companion magazine, *Western Story?* I should think Cherry Wilson might well be a favorite author of any reader named Cherry Wilson.

NOTES NOTES

DEFENDER OF WOMANHOOD

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for four years. One of your readers recently wrote that girls shouldn't be in the stories, that females didn't belong where the bullets fly thick. I hope she doesn't forget that the women came with the pioneers to the West and that women helped fight the warlike Indians when the redskins attacked wagon trains or paleface settlements.

Women used to own large ranches; some women still do. In all our wars, women have cared for wounded soldiers—and often right in the danger zones, too. Other women have been very good rodeo performers. Some of our best horse breakers have been women.

Women are good in stories when they don't get too heroic.

Yours truly,

ROBERT EVANS.

Baltimore, Md.

NOTES

GLADNESS

DEAR EDITOR: I'm mighty loaded down with gladness to note the return of many favorite characters in the past few months. *Muy gracias*, as my Spanish friends would say.

Adios,

SAM HUNTER.

Los Angeles, Cal.

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¿QUIEN SABE?

Continued from page 75

1. *They were beached near pine trees, their cargoes unloaded, the boats turned over, their buffalo-skin bottoms dried and the leaky areas smeared with pitch from the trees. After the boats were refloated and reloaded, then were poled up or down the streams to their destinations, with stops for similar treatment if more leaks developed.*
2. *Wild West shows, the first and most famous of which was Buffalo Bill's. Another famous Wild West show was Pawnee Bill's.*
3. *A sneak boat is a small boat that floats with gunwales low in the water, used for duck hunting because it is inconspicuous. A skunk boat is not a boat, but a boat-shaped barrier of canvas staked around a sleeper on the ground to shield him from attacks by hydrophobia skunks.*
4. *No; it gets its name for rustling with a sound like the rattle of a rattlesnake. It is also called brome grass.*
5. *They peeled willow wands with their teeth and hung the scalps on them.*
6. *No, but they used bats for the same purpose. They caught the bats in a cave, brought them along with the smuggled goods, attached messages to the bats and liberated them after the contraband was delivered, knowing that a bat returns to the cave whence it was taken. In the cave, it was easy for the man expecting the message to identify the bat bearing the message and capture it.*
7. *Yes. They welcomes the presence of bats because those flying animals prey on mosquitoes, large number of which were maliaria-carrying insects. Thus bats helped the settlers greatly in their fight against diseases of the plains.*
8. *To protect them from brush, prevent contact with corral posts, protect from lunges of cattle and add weight to the saddle while riding bucking broncos.*
9. *Because black is the Indians' victory color, and they acquired the habit of wearing black hats when the Union army gave them their extra hats after the war between the States.*
10. *Yes. The pressure of the air in inclosed rooms plus that of the outside air in a tornado often causes houses to explode like bombshells.*

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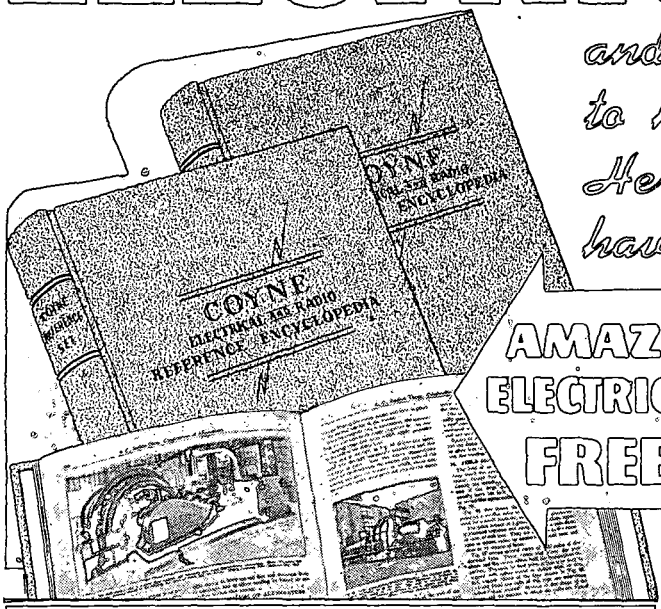

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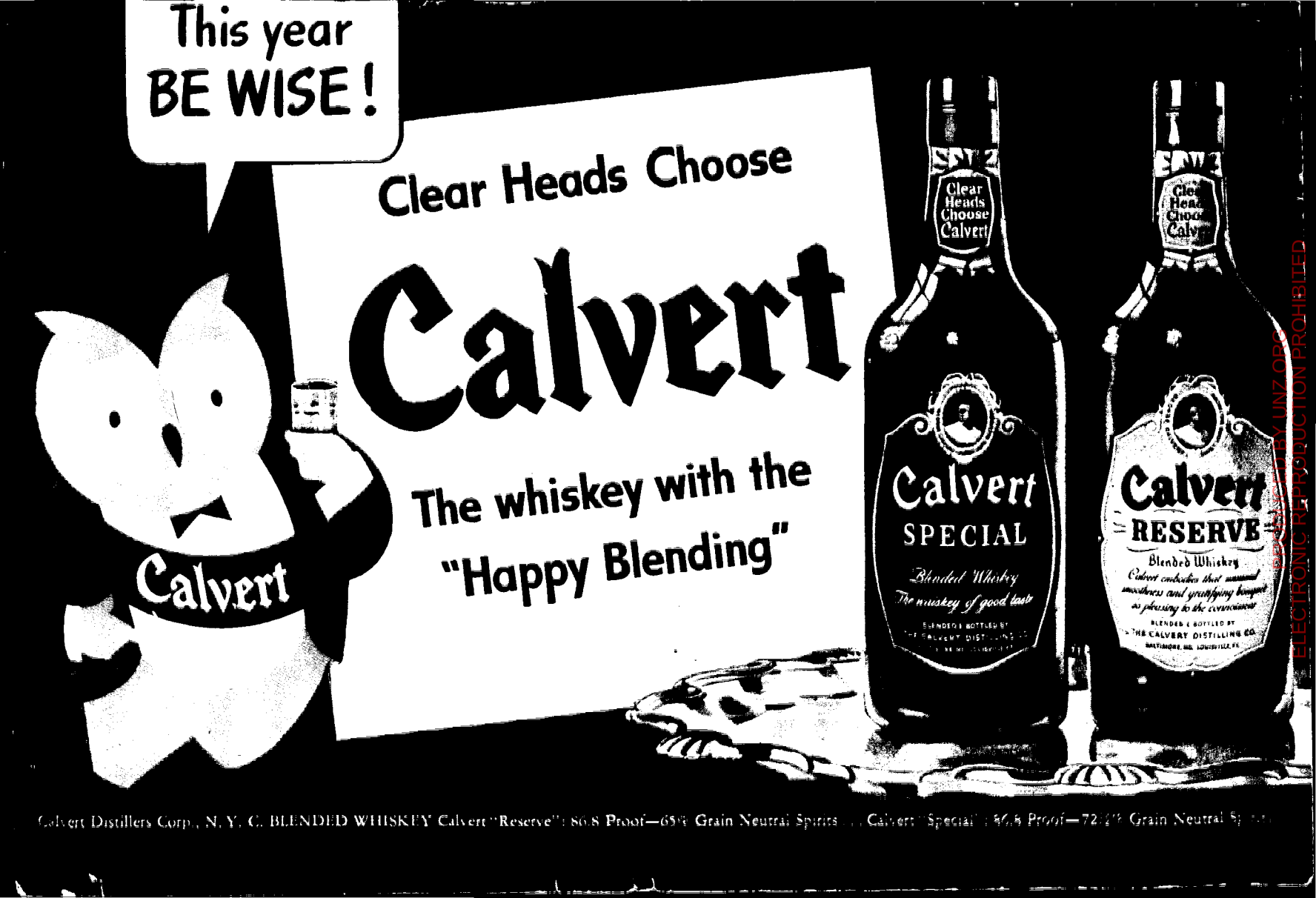

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